

Everything
A Novel on Meaning
Steven DeLay

As always,
to Gabbie

Chapter 1

It would be easy. Nothing to it, really. “Meet me there at seven,” it said. Toying the text over, he had spent the better part of the afternoon smoking cigarettes in his apartment living room debating whether or not he should show up early. It was Tuesday, so if the usual bartender would be working, he might get a free shot of Fireball. Whiskey always made him gag a little, and if things went well, he would have to be careful not to get too drunk as the night drew on, but in this case one quick shot might be worth the risk, since it would settle his nerves, and help him feel natural.

He told himself that, in any event, he had to remember there was always the fact that even if nothing happened tonight, things would probably go well enough to mean it would later that weekend. The thought helped ease the self-consciousness he was feeling over his sweaty palms. He hated when they got like this. He kept wiping them on his shirt on the walk over, but to no avail. Still clammy. When they went to greet each other with a hug tonight, he thought, she could of course decide to believe that it was only the summer humidity. But that was a longshot, he knew. She would know he was anxious. Maybe she would find it cute or flattering. The whole thing was nothing to think about anyway, he finally decided, but just something he was worrying over for no good reason. People’s hands get sweaty sometimes. Even hers. Everyone knows that. Silly to lend it any further thought than he already had.

He climbed the stairs to the entrance, rolled up the sleeves to his shirt, peeled it off from sticking against his side, and then opened the door. “Hey man,” the bartender said, as he stepped in. Blinded from the bright sun, he made his way through the dim interior. He sat down on a stool at the counter’s elbow and glanced out the wide front window onto the residential street outside, as he waited on his sight to adjust. In the middle of the park, the fountain’s water sculpture, he thought it was Hermes but had never bothered to read the inscription, was attracting the sparrows and pigeons. A homeless man was sleeping on a bench in the shade. In the window’s reflection, he saw the bartender walking from the ice machine toward him with a napkin for his glass. He placed it on the counter.

“How’s it going? Shot?” the bartender asked. Turning to face the bartender, he cracked a sheepish smile: “Sure.” He wondered whether the bartender knew he was sad, wondered whether the bartender himself was sad too, wondered whether the bartender wondered whether he ever wondered whether they, like everyone else, were both sad. Sometimes in life there didn’t seem to be any point in saying what really matters, since it didn’t stand to change anything. He thought about how words are strange like that. Sometimes they can do something. Other times they can’t. What’s the point in stating that something is the way it is? Words don’t alter or improve anything about it. The situation makes speaking redundant. Emotions, thoughts, even events themselves—they are like animals at the zoo. Items at which we just look and point. And still, despite feeling the futility of his words to accomplish anything, as he watched the whiskey pour into the glass, he found himself imagining what would happen if he did tell the bartender what was on his mind. He felt a rush of exhilaration at the possibility,

but before he could continue playing with it, the scenario evaporated, the flight of fancy dispelled by the realization that his tongue, as if possessed by a mind of its own, was already in motion. “Thanks,” he heard himself say. They nodded to each other, clinked glasses, and swigged back the burn. “Let me know if you want another one,” the bartender said.

Two others were sitting quietly next to one another at the other end of the counter, coworkers by the looks of it, and they glanced up from their phones as the bartender went to serve them. Shouldn’t have done that shot, he thought to himself. He sighed softly. His gaze drifted across the crimson wall behind the bar, and found the tilted clock hanging above the refrigerated beer. It read five-thirty. Well, now he knew he will have already had two or three shots by the time it was seven. The amusing Pascal line that periodically would come to his mind flashed into his consciousness, “All of mankind’s problems stem...”

This was a mood he’d experienced before, one where all things feel like they were a game. That life itself was an experiment, but without any right answer. As a child in elementary school, especially during the closing weeks of the year nearing summer vacation, he had sometimes been struck by the contingency of it all, that he was at this school rather than some other, that he was in this grade rather than the one above him, that he lived where he did rather than in Massachusetts or some other distant place he’d heard of or had read about in a book. His teacher Ms. Kearley, he could see, was in a way a child just like them, only in a bigger body. Everyone he knew was there without knowing how or why. But nobody ever said it. When he had wondered at the time whether the adults recognized it, and simply chose not to say so, because they understood the children would one day figure it out on their own eventually, he would stare out the classroom window onto the play yard’s trees and tables, temporarily released from the boredom, consoled by the thought that, if everything were in fact a big game, then none of what his teacher or anyone else said really mattered. Maybe everyone was wrong about everything. How would they know? When, then, she would tell them all, “Live and Let Live,” he felt as if his teacher’s mantra were a feeble attempt at answering a deeper question she would not raise explicitly. He had heard stories from his father about how, in the past, the entire Valley would have at that time of year been abloom with apricot and plum orchards for as far as the eye could see. Eventually had come the defense firms and with it the suburban sprawl, and then in turn the technology companies, which only made the congestion worse. When he was born, by then all of the orchards had already disappeared, and what used to be was gone. He would stare out the school window trying to imagine the past to his surroundings he had never known, and would think about how one day he and all his friends and everyone they knew would all be gone, too.

Now, sitting at the bar as a young man at that stage in his twenties when thirty still feels to be remote, he realized that everything had turned out to confirm what he had suspected while daydreaming as a child. Just as the school’s name, Old Orchard, was a testament to one irretrievable past, so too it was a reminder that the current present would in the future likewise fade away to be forgotten like every other past that had preceded it. Everything was forgetting.

The recognition that everything he knew was destined to disappear didn't fill him with dread, as many of the philosophers he read all said that it should, but it did make him sad. Truth be told, sometimes he resented others who tried pretending as if they sincerely liked it this way, as if they really weren't bothered by the fleetingness haunting everything that they claimed to hold so dear. As far as he could tell, either they must not truly love what they say as much as they say they do, or else they must be hiding the sadness of knowing things are a vapor, he thought. At some point, he presumed, like him they also had discovered that maybe life was nothing but an experiment, and that nobody really knew what to do with existence. The notion seemed to him unavoidable, yet something about the idea of existence being an experiment could never sit well with him. Those words from the lips of the one who imbibed the spirit of Zarathustra came to mind, "Hearing the news ... we philosophers and free spirits feel illuminated by a new dawn; our heart overflows with gratitude, amazement, forebodings, expectation..." He didn't deny that many people he had met appeared to relish it, as if a weight had been lifted off their shoulders, and they could finally relax after admitting that nothing really mattered. For his own part, though, he found the attitude to life's transience unnerving. There was something repulsive about seeing others deciding that, because time leads only to death, life for them would be about bodily enjoyment, or egoistic gratification, or social success, or whatever they wanted to take comfort in. It seemed too easy, too self-serving. Of course, as he would be the first to acknowledge, he ultimately was no exception, sitting as he was here at the bar. But at least he was honest about it all, he thought.

So he took a sip of his beer, and walked out to the downstairs patio, where he lit a cigarette. He exhaled, and stared at the smoke rising to the ceiling. Then again, he thought, because nobody really talked about so much of what makes life what it is, he was left to concede that maybe others felt exactly the same way he did. For all he knew, maybe they assumed they were the only ones who had such insights, while it was all the others such as himself who were oblivious to the reality of existence's being a game.

Five students walked up the entryway stairs, laughing with each other as the bearded doorman checked their IDs. Yes, in looking on, he saw how, to them, he must be just another faceless somebody who didn't know what they took themselves alone to know. But if everyone's the same, stuck playing this game, then invariably these students must have at some point had his same thoughts, meaning they too had realized that, in the eyes of others, it was they who would appear to be the clueless ones bumbling through life oblivious to their own obliviousness. But, then, if *that* were the case, *then*—he felt his mind beginning to spin. He would file the thought away for the time being, to revisit it later, to think his way down to the bottom of wherever the spiraling vortex of logic might take him. At the moment, he wasn't in the mood for hyper-reflection. In the final analysis, there was no end to it anyway. Eventually, even the act of thinking is itself seen to be pointless, he had concluded many times before. Camus's absurdity, right? Shaking his head, he chuckled to himself. Why, he wondered, did people always attach another's name to their own thoughts? A thought's a thought. It suddenly seemed so odd to him how even within the privacy of his own mind he could succumb so easily

to the temptation, to the rule that he must attribute his thoughts to somebody else. He wondered if others did that too. He looked at the park fountain across the street, finished his beer with a gulp, took a final drag on his cigarette, left the empty can on the patio's railing overhanging the sidewalk, leaned out to stick his face into the shining sun, and then walked back in.

Inside, the bartender was wiping down the glasses stacked next to the refrigerator. The bartender turned his head to glance over his shoulder. He raised his hand in order to get the bartender's attention. "A Lone Star and another whiskey, please, Billy," he said. He stared out into the space illuminated softly by the red bordello lamps and chandeliers. It was an oddity that had struck him before, and which he could not explain, that somehow even in the midst of an existence he knew technically may not have mattered, good manners nonetheless retained their charm.

Chapter 2

If everything's an illusion, then nothing is. That, he thought, would be the first premise in any argument that stood a plausible chance of refuting nihilism. After all, in order to draw any legitimate distinction between mere appearance and reality, there must be something genuinely real. But, so the line of thought would continue, to insist that everything is illusion is to abolish the distinction between reality and appearance, and that means the very notion of appearance, and hence illusion itself, would slip into incoherence. *Ergo*, because it entails the elimination of the distinction between appearance and reality, nihilism, which thereby implies everything is an illusion, must be false. That seemed right. He was sure, though, that if he were to write it down on paper and think it over more carefully, he would find something about it that somebody would allege to be an error in its reasoning. And, anyway, even if it were flawless, anyone who didn't want to accept the conclusion that nihilism is false would be required to object to it, nevertheless. At that point, naturally he could argue that the very act of objecting to the argument is a performative contradiction, since somebody's arguing that there is no point to anything itself presupposes there at least is a point to arguing so. In response, the self-proclaimed nihilist would introduce some subtlety to avoid the charge of self-refutation, maybe by arguing that the claim of self-stultification was equivocating on the meaning of the word "point." Thus, so on and so forth it would continue. It was all precisely as Fichte had said, "What sort of philosophy one chooses depends on..." The entire argument he was currently imagining, and which he had actually participated in many times before, felt empty to him in a way that made him wonder how different he was from the nihilist. If having the argument wasn't worth having, was the nihilist really wrong?

Were he here, his friend David Itlas, for instance, no doubt would begin by magnanimously conceding that the argument was certainly clever, and then proceed to try shredding it to pieces. He thought about calling David, to see whether he and his roommate

Jack Murphy wanted to come down for a beer, but that would only unnecessarily inconvenience everyone. David was the type who had struggled from youth with attracting girls, and his girlfriend Margo, or rather now ex-girlfriend, who had been living in New York City, had left him recently. Given the rawness of the break-up, and his tendency to view the actions of others as underhanded attempts to slight him, David would predictably interpret the invitation tonight to the bar as an obvious ploy to flaunt the fact that he was meeting a girl, whereas David was not. It was the petty kind of thing that he usually could overlook. Ever since moving to Houston a few years ago, he'd grown accustomed to incurring whatever judgment David's inferiority complex was bound to elicit for the sake of the philosophical discussion. It had come with the territory, and it had seemed worthwhile. For one thing, their mutual friends appreciated David's wit and humor, and because his friend's bespectacled face and disheveled hair was a permanent fixture at all the parties, he was impossible to avoid. It only made sense to try to focus on his endearing traits, rather than to dwell on what made him irritating. Lately, though, he had been growing tired of the intellectual sparring itself, not just the snide comments and innuendos. So, tonight would be as good as any other to try something different. He put his phone back in his pocket, and went back to waiting for seven.

A slightly overweight, balding businessman in a frumpy brown suit entered and took a seat at one of the booths by the front window. He began looking at the menu. Occasionally he would peer out the window, evidently waiting on someone who was supposed to join him. A few minutes later, another man came through the door and strode up to the booth, took a seat, removed his suit jacket and loosened his periwinkle tie, and picked up a menu. After placing their food orders with the woman working the kitchen, the two came to the bar, took their drinks, and then sat back down, where they would point and laugh at what they were watching on the television. At the moment, the television was turned to some cable sports channel, and later in the evening, as was the custom, it would be playing old black and white Hollywood movies. The procession of patrons steadily increased, as more customers filed into the bar. By about six-thirty, there wasn't a seat left at the counter or in the booths, and the front patio where he had smoked his cigarette was full too, which meant people were beginning to have to trickle to the upstairs balcony. This was busy for a Tuesday.

He asked the man sitting next to him to watch his seat, and he walked down the black and white striped hallway connecting the bar to the restrooms. He splashed his face with water and dried his hands with a paper towel. As he returned to the counter staring at his feet, he mulled over whether the hallway's chess board theme was simply an innocent decorating decision, or whether the owner had meant to signal with it a Freemasonic connection. Those initiated into that world, especially business types, liked making it clear to others who had a need to know, because it was good for business. For a start, it helped garner leniency with the law. The underworld's presence couldn't be overlooked anywhere, certainly not in here. The brothel operating two blocks away in broad daylight, for instance, was an open secret to everyone in the neighborhood, and apparently there were even a number of police officers who regularly frequented it. In all likelihood, much of the drug-dealing that occurred at the bar,

and at others like it in the area, was known to the police, but so long as the police got their cut, none of the employees, or policeman, or anyone else, would ever say a word. He remembered an old friend of his, whose brother was an inventor and small business owner, telling him about the existence of corporate espionage and blackmail. His friend's brother's company had been ripped off by a large corporation that stole the former's product. When the CEO of the company died in a private plane crash a few years after the commercial theft, his friend couldn't help but laugh, since as far as he was concerned, the man had it coming. He had come home one afternoon to find his friend standing alone on the back porch smoking a cigarette in the sun, a grin on his face. "What happened?" he asked. "Klein died yesterday. Plane crash," his friend had answered. He probably finally crossed the wrong powerful competitor, and that had been it for him, his friend said. When the next year his old friend began complaining about neurological ailments that he suspected were the result from a night in which he had been poisoned at a Chinese restaurant in Portland, their other roommates stopped taking seriously his stories about the criminal underworld. But he always felt like there was a core of insight involved in them, even now.

Take the two men eating together now in the booth. The second one to enter, who was Chinese, could be a perfectly innocent energy executive, or accountant, or partner at a legal firm. But how did anyone know for sure? The Chinese Consulate was just down the street from the bar, and if the Chinese Communist Party had hired him to gather information from the other man at the booth, the latter likely wouldn't have a clue. And if the man slipped something into the other man's drink that killed him, like his old friend claimed somebody had tried to do to him in Portland, who would be the wiser? Somebody would point out that one could go to the police, but what good would that do, when the police themselves were the ones protecting much of the crime, like at the brothel? For his own part, at any rate, he always tried to ignore the drugs at the bar. Not out of paranoia, but moral sensitivity. As much as he drank and smoked, drugs still made him uncomfortable. It had always seemed to him that using drugs was a way of admitting that one had finally quit, and so he always felt a mix of pity and aversion for those who did them.

Back at the counter, the man he had asked to guard his seat had left and it had been taken, but another one had opened up, so he sat down there instead, and called Billy. "Whiskey and Lone Star, please," he said.

By the time it reached the point in the night when he realized that the bar would be closing soon, he complimented himself for not having thought about it since around ten o'clock. Rebecca hadn't shown up, which wasn't entirely unexpected, since, if he now were being honest, she had appeared to be the type who enjoyed appearing busier than she was, and although he was a little embarrassed that she hadn't come or even contacted him to explain why not, he decided there was comfort in being alone at the moment, perched at the bar like a Nighthawk, able to watch others, to surmise what they did, where they were from, and what they thought was giving their night purpose. Some friend of Rebecca's was there in the

downstairs crowd, talking to others. She had come in sometime after midnight, and had not looked over once at him, but he assumed she would tell Rebecca that she had seen him there. She and the others nudged their way through the crowd to the bar, ordered another round, then headed up the stairs. He noticed that she looked at him right before disappearing from view. She probably was hoping to judge whether he was there waiting. He thought it was funny, the fact that even at their age things had not changed considerably from the dynamics of middle school. If Rebecca and her friends thought that he was sculpting a style that he wanted them to see, they were wrong. He didn't care. Or at least he was rather sure he didn't care. How would anyone, including himself, really know with certainty? What's the standard by which one could decide such things, anyway? Probably Wittgenstein had something enlightening to say about the situation, but he had never read any of him, though the name arose constantly in conversations among his friends. In the immediate aftermath of her not showing up, he had guzzled a few beers in rapid succession, which had left him lethargic for an hour or so, but as the night unfolded, he ended up feeling fairly alert, and relatively placid, all things considered. He was still restless in that way he always was, with that longing feeling that there was somewhere better to be, only to have the realization moments later that there wasn't anywhere else to be, that this was where he was, and that was just the way it is. Maybe she and her friends wanted to see how he would react to the situation, but instead of calling or texting her to play along, or heading upstairs to talk to her little envoy, he decided he was done with it.

Somebody standing behind him kept elbowing him in the back. Although sitting at the bar was convenient because it meant he didn't have to stand, there was always somebody squeezing into the little spaces to his either side, to order. He liked listening to what people wanted, and sometimes he would try to guess what they would ask for before they did. As he was just preparing to leave, Billy came over and asked whether he would like a final round before it was time to close out. On nights like these when it could take ten or fifteen minutes to get one's turn, it was nice to have the bartender come to him. There was no reason to feel proud about it, since being a regular at the bar wasn't anything to boast about, but in the frenzy of emotions and the swirl of voices and intermingled bodies, there was something satisfying about it. Sometimes people would ask whether he might order for them, but he would say no, since he assumed one of the reasons Billy would let him cut the queue was because he didn't bend the rules. "Lemon Drop, please." "A shot of it?" "Yes, a shot, not a cocktail." He forgot to say please.

As Billy was mixing the shot, a couple nudged in beside him. The man was in his twenties, with styled black hair, a gold watch, and a button-down and jacket. He was tall, well over six feet, with a tan complexion that suggested he was Italian, or maybe middle-eastern. The girl turned from her companion and suddenly looked at him, "What are you having?" At first, he was confused, because they had never met, and so he thought maybe she was talking to someone sitting behind him, or had mistaken him for somebody she knew. "Uh, a Lemon Drop," he said, pointing to Billy. "I love those," she said. The man she was with turned to Billy,

“Two more Lemon Drops.” From the way they talked, it was clear that Billy knew the two as well as he knew him, but he had never seen them there before. He would have remembered seeing her. Billy lined out the shots, including one for himself. They all grabbed one, looked at each other and laughed, and drank down the juicy concoction. The girl was beautiful, with big searching brown eyes, black hair, and porcelain skin. He couldn’t remember the last time a girl had intimidated him, but he was scared to talk to her, afraid that he would say something stupid. He could tell she was smart. Despite her sensuality, there was a purity to it, as if she were a saint passing through this place to which she didn’t belong, to encourage everyone else there that they were out of place too, if only they would remember it, and recall who they had once been before they’d become what they now were. The man she was with was probably her boyfriend, though it was ambiguous, because the man, judging by his mannerisms, could just as well maybe been homosexual. Before he had any further opportunity to wonder, the man wrapped his arm around her, kissed her, and the two laughed. He could feel himself receding from her awareness, her attention drawn to others they knew at the counter, and he knew it would look desperate to say anything. He tapped her on the shoulder, and she spun around, a pleasant smile on her face. He told her his name. “I’m Alison,” she said. They shook hands awkwardly, a gesture that was overly formal, comic really, given the circumstances, but so it was. The man she was with turned to them both, and without a hint of jealousy, introduced himself as well. “Justice,” he said extending his hand. There were the girls he had met with names after the theological virtues—Hope, Faith, Charity—but this was the first he’d ever met a man named after a virtue. He chuckled to himself, and took it as a sign that he ought not to meddle, closed out his tab, and left without saying another word to the couple, or to anyone else.

He strode down the stairs to the sidewalk, and brushed past the groups of people gathered outside chatting and smoking in the muggy night. A few girls smiled, but he ignored them, because he was thinking about the couple from inside. Headlights from the idling cars flooded the street, as their passengers readied to leave for whatever after parties were planned. A few cyclists whizzed past. He glanced behind the taco truck to make sure the coast was clear of traffic, and he crossed the street. He heard the raucousness from the balcony, the sound of laughter and shouting over the music. He turned back to look. The white Christmas lights they kept up all year round were dangling from the upstairs walls, and the downstairs red interior light, which sometimes could look sinister, appeared almost homey. After a few minutes, he turned away to walk home, passing the park fountain along the way. The man who had been sleeping on the bench was nowhere to be seen, and the birds were tucked away in their nests. A strong wind blew through the big oaks, and the cicadas suddenly quieted down. As he was a block from home, he heard a loud clap of thunder, and moments later a torrential rain started pouring. He didn’t feel like running, so he lifted his face upward to the night sky, opened his mouth, and felt the droplets strike his neck and face. When he reached the front garden to the building, its wet grass and shrubs were glistening in the moonlight, the rain pelting like gunfire against the bricks and the hoods of the parked cars.

In the hall, he could hear that his neighbor down the way in the corner unit was still up. Its tenant, Timothy Mangs, was a medical student. He was brilliant, and kind too. But lately the pressure and drudgery of the rounds and shifts was beginning to tax him, and as his dependence on marijuana and hallucinogens to relax had worsened, he was becoming noticeably erratic. He would talk uninterruptedly for long stretches, and when one finally had the chance to respond, he wouldn't hear a word before launching in again into another spiel. His long white blond hair and fiery blue eyes had always given him the look of a Nordic warrior, but now there was something unsettling about his inner ferocity. His thoughts would come in barrages, sometimes bordering on the incoherent, almost as if he were narrating aloud his subconscious, just to see how others would react or how long they could endure it.

Timothy, in a word, was someone who was recognizing that so much of everyday life is pretense, that there is very little reason for what most people say or do, and that much of life is tolerating the inanity of it all. When it came down to it, his neighbor couldn't reconcile his own motivations for being at medical school with the norms of the profession. He would complain about how his fellow students had no desire to truly understand medicine, but only cared about learning what they had to learn for their exams. As for the doctors themselves, many of them were arrogant and self-centered, more concerned with impressing their students and other subordinates than they were serving the needy. To cope, he had been steadily freeing himself from the bonds of social expectation, including the norms at the hospital. Clearly, it was giving him a thrill, and it only reinforced the underlying conviction spurring it, that everything was all just theater anyway. He didn't fault him for regarding much of everydayness as purely groundless, and sometimes he couldn't help but laugh at the amusing stories his neighbor told him about how he was finding some new way of subverting the silly protocol of doing things in his program, but he did worry that his neighbor's volatile experiment in nonconformism was taking a detrimental turn. At the very least, there was too much self-indulgence in it all. When he would ask him whether he was truly prepared to flunk out, he would say yes, but he noticed that Timothy would invariably mention how he didn't care if his parents, both of whom were psychiatrists, would mind if he never finished medical school. It was hard not to conclude that his parents had probably placed a lot of pressure on him to follow this path, and maybe this was his way of finally saying no to it. His sister, Tanya, who was from another city, San Antonio if memory served, had been to visit a few weeks ago, probably to try to keep the family peace. At work, of course, nobody saw Timothy as a rebellious son or difficult brother who was defying his demanding parents and worrying his responsible sister. In a way, the fact that nobody knew it, only underscored his gripe about how modern work life, even in the medical field, was superficial, a place where one did what one was expected to do, and that was it.

The music from Timothy's apartment was blaring through the walls, and echoing down the hall. If his neighbor had not passed out and was still awake, at this hour he would be stoned and manic. He knew that he would have to talk to Timothy the next time they saw each other, to make sure he was holding up. But as for now, rather than knock on his door and walk into what would be too overwhelming of a situation, he walked straight to his own door, turned the

key, and stepped inside. For a brief moment, he was flooded by an overwhelming feeling of melancholy, of how broken everyone he knew was. He threw his soaking clothes in a pile on the floor, flopped down on the bed, and went to sleep.

Chapter 3

The next day, he woke up late. He washed some dishes that had been lying in the kitchen sink for too long. Some of the spaghetti sauce from a pan splattered on his shirt, but he didn't bother changing it. Then he sat down on the discolored white couch in the living room. The chances of anything happening the rest of the week were remote, he felt. He didn't know what the absence of expectation was even precisely directed toward, but it was there. If nothing else, he thought, there were always books, so he took one from off the shelf next to the door and began reading.

Saturday came. It was Mick Firth's twenty-eighth birthday. When he got to the house that was rented by their mutual friends Paul and Clara, he walked down their driveway, following the sound of the Aussie's voice booming from the backyard. He turned the corner of the house to find Mick sitting in the grass on a purple beach chair, a Foster's in one hand resting on his lap, the other hand rubbing his belly that was shaking heavily from all the laughing. Tony and Cody, two others from the crew, were sitting next to Mick, and looked up.

Tony said, "Hey man."

"Hi, Tony," he waved. "Happy birthday, Mick."

Mick's blond crew cut was freshly trimmed, and he had bought a new pair of expensive black arthouse glasses, the sort somebody else might call hip, though it was a term he wouldn't use to describe them, since he had never liked the word. The minor make-over wasn't about the birthday per se. Mick would be finishing his doctoral work soon, and when he did, it would then be time for a professorship somewhere, maybe in his native Australia, so he was preparing to look the part, by cleaning up a little. "Thanks, mate," Mick drawled.

Cody was silent, so he simply nodded. To be expected; they had never gotten along well. It had been a competition between them ever since meeting, over girls, to an extent, but over ideas mainly. He was in his twenties, like most of them, but with a bit of grey in his beard. He was average height with a somewhat oafish body and splay feet, but his piercing blue eyes could be halting, and he had learned how to use them to his advantage, by saying a lot with them. He was a smart, ambitious master's philosophy student, with an interest in the philosophy of science, and he had set his intentions on entering a top doctoral program somewhere, meaning he did not expect to be here long, which contributed to the sense of superiority in his aloofness. According to him, everything was atoms and the void, so he had extremely little patience for philosophical systems that made room for freedom of the will, or human values, and morals. As for God, that was completely out of the question, of course, a

useless hypothesis, and an embarrassing vestige of a more primitive time when our psychological apparatus had still required it. In time, though, he would always say, it was inevitable that evolution would progress, and we finally would be freed of such crass superstitions. The timetable involved was impossible to know, but in the meantime, we could hope to resist catering to our human myths any more than was absolutely necessary. It was a materialist's duty. As he opened a beach chair and placed it on the grass next to Cody and the other two, the rest of that Fichte passage entered his mind, "A philosophical system is not a dead piece of furniture that we can accept or reject as we wish, it is rather a thing animated by the soul of the person who holds it."

Turning his gaze to Mick, his mind's attention remained on Cody. He wondered what it could be in a soul to make somebody want to believe that everything that was said to make human life unique and noble was only an illusion. Was a man truly no different than the chair in his hand? Was everyone and everything just cells contacting other cells? Tony, a philosophy instructor in his early thirties originally from Miami, happened to agree with Cody's cold vision of the cosmos, but he didn't seem to take the same perverse pleasure in the nihilistic idea that Cody did. His grandparents had come from Cuba to flee Castro, and his family had instilled an underlying boisterousness and heartiness in him that made his philosophical views, which were so clinical, appear only to be a veneer, and which he wore like a set of clothes that didn't fit. And as for David, who no doubt would be over to the house soon, as irascible and curmudgeonly as he could be, there was a similar gap between life and thought. The proposition that there was no God, or soul, or immortality clearly tormented him. One late evening when David had people over to his apartment, he recalled David taking a drag off his cigarette, exhaling sorrowfully, and addressing the others in the room. "Puh! The idea that we have souls? You can't just set a system of thought into motion with an assumption like that. It's unprovable. Nobody knows! I mean, hell, I don't even know if I have a soul," he had said. He remembered how David had said it all so self-deprecatingly, with a thicker Canadian accent than usual, as if to concede that he understood modern science had sufficiently persuaded him he was only an animal. But he was torn, and the grief in his eyes revealed that he hadn't abandoned all hope that there was more to man, to himself.

He could hear a car pull up to the front. A minute later, Jack came grinning around the corner, a cigarette dangling from his lips, his shoulders, already pink from the noon sun, exposed by one of those tank-tops he always wore. "What's up, guys? Ready for a party today?" The screen door swung open, and then there was David, who had arrived with Jack. He skipped down the stairs to the yard, along with the renters, Paul and Clara, all three of them wearing matching big straw hats. Everyone was in good spirits. Mick's birthday had provided the occasion to try something new for a change, so instead of sitting around drinking all day in the yard, the plan was to barbeque out at the lake. It was less than an hour by car to Huntsville, so they'd have the afternoon, even the evening, if they decided to stay for the sunset and a campfire. Later tonight, the bar would be swarming with young people from the Heights and

Montrose, and the intrigue of it all meant that, without anyone having to say a word, they knew they would all end up there together after returning from the lake.

A couple other cars with others they knew would be coming this afternoon also, though they wouldn't be stopping at Paul and Clara's place first. They would meet at the lake.

They stowed the chairs and coolers in the trunk, and as he thought they were about to leave, Karl Roybal, Jack's best friend, arrived frantically on his bike. He had his beach towel wrapped around his neck, the sunscreen on his face was barely rubbed in, and the pair of sandals he was wearing looked like they were poised to slip off his feet. Karl had shown the most scholarly promise of anyone there. Not long ago, he had clashed with some of the professors at one of the country's top graduate philosophy programs that he'd been attending. One day, tired of the gamesmanship, he quit. He had ended up back here in his hometown at their university's philosophy department, where he had ever since been suffering through a terrible case of writer's block. Generally, he was affable and lighthearted, polite and tender, but beneath the calm exterior there was a fierceness, an edge that came out when he had been drinking, and was discussing somebody whose character he didn't respect. Karl and Timothy, he realized just then, were very similar in many regards, two immensely gifted men who were both busy convincing themselves that honor and authenticity demanded they fail out of the system. To be honest, it was hard to fault them. Graduate school, it had begun to seem to him as well, had more to do with being a compliance test than an intellectual one. So after having floated listlessly through a first year in the program, it was appearing increasingly likely that Karl would quit by the end of summer, and wouldn't be back for the fall. It was uncertain what would be next, assuming he did. Recently, he had been mentioning Austin, and he thought he had heard Karl say that he had a sister there. He couldn't remember anyone ever having asked their friend about his parents. Already in his forties, Karl was older than the rest of them, so for all they knew, his parents were already dead. Or maybe just estranged.

The possibility that his friend might kill himself had crossed his mind more than once. He didn't like thinking about it, but sometimes Karl could say things that would make people uneasy like that. To be sure, although personally he believed in the absoluteness of human freedom, which is why he disagreed so vehemently with Cody and Tony's materialistic determinism, that didn't prevent him from denying that sometimes things certainly could appear they were fated, as if people, and here Karl appeared to be an exemplary case, had been forced to accept what everybody knew was supposed to become of them. And from what he could tell, Karl had the downcast appearance of a man struggling to resign himself to the inevitability of his own looming failure. As he watched Karl chatting with the others, he thought that it was unfair how good men like Karl and Timothy were punished for attempting to do what everyone said was right to do, while the others in charge of their programs, and who had betrayed the values their institutions should represent, were living high on the hog. A world where gentle spirits like Timothy could be the dean of a medical school and Karl the chair of a philosophy department would be superior to how it was in this one. They never said so to

anyone, but it was evident that the inversion of it all was driving them both to despair, leading them inexorably closer to that threshold beyond which the disgust would be too much to bear. Then they would quit, and perhaps the worst part about it all was the knowledge that the ones at their programs responsible knew it was only be a matter of time, just as Timothy and Karl knew it too.

Although the hazing was nothing as obvious as what Karl was facing, he had sometimes himself begun wondering whether his advisor, Carrell, were trying to get him to quit also. They had a meeting scheduled for next week at the campus coffee house which he was dreading, because they would be discussing his course paper that by then would have a grade. It felt like things were coming to a head. He almost mentioned it to the others sitting there, but instead of asking for their opinion, he decided he would forget about it for the rest of the day. Karl probably didn't want to talk about school, either.

Looking at Karl in the afternoon heat, he decided he was witnessing a premonitory figure of what Timothy would himself be in fifteen years, if the latter really carried through his plan to destroy his societal aspirations beginning with his spot in medical school. He wondered what Timothy and Karl would make of each other, if they ever met. Given all of their mutual friends and acquaintances, odds were that by the end of summer, they would. Perhaps at the bar tonight after the lake. Would they see the similarity? He thought briefly about Dostoevsky's notion of the double, then dropped it.

With the old yellow BMW loaded, it was time to leave. David and Jack, along with Tony and Cody, walked to the car out front and drove off. Karl, who standing well over six feet was the tallest, thought it would be funny to take the middle seat. He climbed in deliberately goofily, his cheek resting on his knees pulled to his chin, and laughed. Mick took the left rear seat, and he took the right one. Paul was high, his puffy eyes nearly shut, but he knew Paul was the type who did everything that way, including driving, so there was no point in suggesting somebody else should drive, since it would only make Paul more resolved to do it, anyway.

To be sure, the two in the front made for an odd couple. Paul Krutt was a local collage artist, and Clara Bell a jewelry maker. When first meeting him, he was charming. In time, though, what initially seemed to be a genuine quirkiness proved to be an act to cover over his pain. The camouflage jacket he would routinely wear was fitting in a way, since it reinforced the impression that he was a soldier of existence growing fatigued with life. He suffered from a terrible drinking problem that made him sloppy, and which helped him accept the inescapability of certain responsibilities he appeared to prefer to have rather been without. His young teenage daughter from a failed marriage was rarely around. Evidently, she lived with the mother. That may have been part of the reason why he and Clara themselves weren't yet married. Although he encouraged the image everyone had of him as a libertine and free-spirit, it was clear he would marry Clara if she were willing. Clara, who was the one averse to marriage, or at least with Paul, allowed others to form the impression that it must be Paul who was actually the one with cold feet. In any case, he was sure he remembered them having once

told everyone why exactly they weren't married, and what their reasons were. Clara had said something about marriage being unnecessary, a point to which everyone had nodded approvingly, but he couldn't quite remember the details of what they all said, because he had been drunk and not paying close attention.

They weaved through some surface streets, and before long, the car was on the highway. They sped along an overpass spanning a stretch of the city's downtown skyline, passing by the baseball stadium. Before the highway had returned to its usual ground level, he imagined the car curving along the road from above, as if he were trailing themselves from a helicopter.

As they drove on, he looked up at the baby blue sky and white clouds. The sun's rays were shining through, casting a magnificent halo down upon the open road. He thought back to when as kids he and his friends would try to spot figures and faces and other things in the clouds. He knew that nobody in the car would want to do that now, unless it was to look for dirty things just as a joke. Given how they had divided up the cars, it wasn't as unthinkable as it would otherwise be to bring it up. True, it wouldn't take long before somebody, as David immediately would were he there, to make a point about our species' penchant for anthropomorphism in religious matters. Our interaction with the natural environment, David would intone, is no exception. There is, he would conclude, nothing truly to see in the clouds, only whatever we think we see, but isn't in fact really there to be seen. A fragment he once read somewhere entered his mind: "The softness of the sky ... the illusory meaning with which we had clothed it..." Because he had no desire to have the argument that he was sure would result, instead he kept quiet and stared out the side window. He wondered what it was in others that made them so prone to take an innocent proposal about spotting shapes as an opportunity for criticizing belief in God. Although he himself had never seen a sign from heaven in the clouds, he would not scoff at somebody who said that he had.

Come to think of it, the atmosphere in the car reminded him of a similar ride once on a camping trip in the Sierra foothills with his friends and their fathers. As they were driving through intermittent thunder showers, his best friend's father, Ken, who was driving, would look up to the sky, and with a silly face mockingly say, "Look, son, it's raining! It's God!" Then the rain would stop, and he would slip back into character, and say, "Look! The rain's stopped. It's God again!" Even as a child, he remembered being uncomfortable with it. There was something disturbing, even grotesque, about seeing a man angry like that at God. He remembered thinking to himself at the time how it was strange for his friend's father to mock God, when he claimed he didn't think God existed. That was the first time he had seen someone hate God, and as shocking as it was at the time, by now he of course was very used to it. He wondered whether his friends now in the car had parents like Ken who had mocked God when they had been growing up. And he wondered what all of their childhood friends would say if they could see them now. Would their friends be surprised to see how they had turned out? He couldn't talk about any of this with them, since it would spoil the levity that everyone

was hoping to extract from the afternoon. He cheered up by reminding himself that he would soon be swimming. Thoughts about Calvin's doctrine of predestination and Schelling's notion of an eternal choosing of oneself outside time started to threaten to sprout further in his mind. When the ideas from the various textual passages began superimposing a pall of forebodingness over the pleasant scenery, he sighed, and he swiftly banished them from further intruding. He decided to concentrate on emptying himself of anything except what seeing the greenery would make him feel.

A crow was circling over the fields. Watching it transported him to the Ile de la Cite on the Seine, where on Sunday afternoons people in Paris since the early nineteenth century would stroll through the island's exotic bird market. He imagined everyone in the car, Paul and Clara, Karl, Mick, and himself, strolling through the rows of cages, looking at the birds. He wondered which type of bird would be their favorites. He pictured Karl petting a blue parakeet, while two yellow canaries in the same cage sang their song. Mick was taken with a white bird that kept chirping its name: "Pierre, Pierre, Pierre." Out in the wild, the hawk above the car would swoop down and eat the market's songbirds, but they were safe in their cages. He thought about the irony in that. People often would talk about the great feeling of being freed like a bird flying from its cage, but maybe sometimes being trapped was a good thing, since at least it meant not being devoured by whatever might lurk outside. He thought about how one day it would be nice to walk through the market with whomever would be there to share the afternoon. He didn't know who she would be, or how they would meet, but he felt sure that one day they would. If only it weren't for that Justice, he suddenly thought.

When they were nearly to the lake, Paul pulled the car off the highway, taking a wrong exit. As they reached the stop sign at the crest of the hill, there read a brown sign indicating the direction in which the Prison Museum was. As it happened, they were near the location where Texas performs its executions, and evidently there was a museum whose exhibits explored the stories of some of the state's most infamous murderers and their victims. Paul and Clara enjoyed being spontaneous, or at least cultivating the impression they were, so it made sense there would be an unexpected stop. This wasn't a wrong exit, after all, then.

Without any deliberation, his expectation of horizon shifted from what he would do when he got to lake, to what he would now be seeing at the museum in a minute or two. He had voraciously read about history when he was younger, particularly military history, with all the stories of the Army Calvary on the Great Plains, or the Old Breed in the Pacific, or the Desert Fox in North Africa, or the Airborne at Bastogne. He thought about how Monty was overrated, something the disaster of Market Garden had finally proved, and how frustrating it was to see how Eisenhower and Bradley and the other generals had taunted Patton, when everyone had known how much they needed him. For many years, he had thought he would join the military. That was before he came to decide that war was a scam, and that so much of politics is just a cartoonish story for the public to consume, and that only concealed what was really shaping the events over which he, and everyone else he knew, had no control. To be sure, he would

never tell a veteran or a veteran's friends and family that the fighting had been for nothing, that all the men who died had been duped, but he knew that if he ever had a son, he would be sure to warn him about the foolishness of war.

He thought back to the time in seventh grade when a survivor from the USS *Indianapolis*, their history teacher's grandfather, had come to speak to them about being sunk at sea by a torpedo and attacked by the sharks. Before he had come to tell the story, his granddaughter had mentioned that till this day he would never go in the ocean above the ankles. He thought about how all the men who had died horrible deaths out in the water were forgotten, the only remaining trace of their presence consisting in something like Quint's backstory in *Jaws*, events which, when the character relates them in the scene toward the end of the film, most people viewing today would probably think was just something made up for the sake of the movie's story. It had all been a waste, he concluded, as they hopped out of the car, and entered the building.

In one display case, there was a shotgun and pistol that had been retrieved from the car in which Bonnie and Clyde were killed. That would have been roughly around the same time, only a decade beforehand, in fact, that her teacher's grandfather and his friends on the ship had later found themselves floating in the Pacific. He wondered if all the men on the *Indianapolis* had known the story of Bonnie and Clyde, and how they had felt about it, if they did. Maybe, in fact, one of them had thought about the bank robbers, as he was floating in the ocean, doing what he could to distract himself from the reality that he might be pulled under water and chomped to bits by one of the sharks brushing up against everyone's legs dangling beneath the surface of the water. He wondered what the probability associated with the possibility that one of the sailors did have the thought. It was certainly greater than zero. Anything that wasn't an impossibility stood a chance of being actual. There was no way for any of us to know what the probability was, but the fact that the precise likelihood eluded us, only enhanced the feeling that it belonged to being, that it somehow counted for something, at least more than nothing at all. If the sailors had been alive today, he wondered what they would make of the fact that he was standing here looking at these guns, questioning whether everything he had heard from his teacher's grandfather about their experience out in the water during the War had been worth it. By now, most of the men from the *Indianapolis*, including the old man who had talked to them, were dead. Dead just like Bonnie and Clyde. Maybe everything under the sun really is vanity, he couldn't help but think, as he walked to another exhibit.

Everyone from the car had fanned out and gone his own way once inside, but now they all happened to converge at a wall containing a number of portraits, and accompanying plaques. The photos, mostly in black and white, were of various Texas killers executed over the years. There was the obligatory biographical explanation of their life and crimes, and something of course about the time and method of their demise. But far more interesting, he thought, were the statements left by friends and family of the victims. While the plaques represented a

range of views, the preponderance of them expressed feelings of capital punishment's inadequacies. Above all, the families stated how seeing the murderer put to death didn't provide them the closure or sense of justice they had hoped that it would. He had never been a strong advocate of capital punishment, though he conceded the role the desire for vengeance too often played in human affairs. In later years, when he had come to oppose capital punishment entirely, it wasn't because he denied its deterrent effects, or anything like that. He just felt like keeping a man alive was a way of reminding everyone that in the end God will judge. It seemed to him that was the truly fearful thought. Maybe if society feared God more, there wouldn't be whatever need for executions those who supported them think there is.

Without having to ask, he knew of course that his friends were also against the death penalty. He thought about mentioning he was too, since they would be surprised by that. But it all seemed otiose, so he didn't. Clara was drying the tears from her eyes, and Mick looked haunted by the familial testimonials, while Karl was leaning inches away from one portrait, as if he were counting the freckles on the murderer's face. He could understand opposing both the death penalty and abortion together, or else supporting them both, but he had never understood the contortions to which many people would go to support one but not the other. It was strange. Clara, like so many women her age, was perfectly capable of crying for an executed murderer, but she couldn't feel the slightest compassion for a baby murdered in an abortion. To her, one was clearly the victim of an inhumane and barbarous procedure, the other a total afterthought. He wondered why she could feel so differently about the two, and how she reconciled the inconsistency in her mind, or whether she had ever even tried.

"Well, uh, shall we?" Paul said blithely, as he gestured to the car, trying to dispel the heaviness that had suddenly settled over them all. The detour was now threatening to spoil the day's sense of adventure, so it was time to go.

Chapter 4

When the car sped through the gateway into the park, any lingering gloominess had almost completely vanished, which was good, they all thought to themselves, because everyone was eager to forget what had been seen back at the museum. They might talk about it some time when they were bored back in the city, but for now, for the rest of today, any debate about the ethics of killing or the meaning of death would have to wait.

Mick rolled the window down, leaned his head into the wind, and began barking like a dog. He was clutching a bottle of Brut champagne resting on his lap, and for a moment, it appeared he almost might open it while they were still driving. Paul followed suit, rolling his window down too and yelping like an angry chihuahua. Karl sat motionlessly, smiling silently in the middle seat. He wouldn't be barking. Up in the front passenger seat, Clara was staring into her side view mirror, looking to see what he would do. His window had already been rolled down for a while, so to make clear his sympathies lied with Karl, and that he wouldn't be doing

any barking either, he reached his arm fully out the window, flying his hand through the air like an airplane. He could tell she wanted to say something to pressure him to bark too, because she always did that thing girls do, trying to make him do something that she knew would make him uncomfortable, but with Karl also refusing, there would be no way to force him, so she didn't bother.

The other car was already there, with Cody, Tony, David, and Jack sitting around an empty fire pit, red cups in hand. The pine trees provided a nice shade, and their needles didn't make the ground any harder on bare feet. They were lounging in their shorts, everyone but Tony shirtless.

"What took you guys so long?" Jack asked, when he saw them pull up. "We thought you guys were lost." Paul mumbled something about stopping at the museum, but nobody wanted to know the details. It was the lake that mattered, and now they were mostly all here. Someone had put folk music on for ambience, the twang of the banjo and guitar strings mixing with the sounds from the lake's frogs and birds.

David was hunching over, lathering sunscreen on his wispy arms. He didn't look down, but kept his gaze directly on Mick and Cody, both of whom were listening attentively to what he was saying, as they drank their beer. "No, no, he's entirely different from Heidegger. He doesn't think the I-Thou relation is a structural feature of everything. He thinks it is a special type of encounter." David was talking about Martin Buber. "It's not like Levinas, either," he clarified. For reasons he had never been quite able to understand, David loathed Levinas.

"C'mon, David, you're missing the point you know I'm trying to make. Language is a system that determines our thought. Buber's philosophy doesn't get that. He's too Cartesian." Mick, evidently, was deploying a move from some poststructuralist text he had recently been reading over in the English department. Judging by the level of irritation in the Aussie's voice, and the fact that he had just used David's name, the two had already both made their respective points a few times, and neither was budging.

"Mick is right. Language is a system," Cody stated flatly. Mick and Cody had entirely different conceptions of the sense in which language was a system, of course, but at this stage in the debate, they found themselves allies, since the latter was hoping to parlay Mick's observation about systematicity into a broader one about how everything, and not just language, was a Laplacian system of physical laws. Jack was standing over at the bench fixing a hotdog, but he was listening intently, and, given the direction the discussion was taking, he was liable to interject with a comment about Leibniz's doctrine of infinite analysis. It would be necessary to point out its relevance to the question at issue, he could see Jack nodding to himself, and so in Jack's excitement to hurry to rejoin the conversation, he spilled some relish. Karl, who was also a Leibniz adept, detected the same opening as Jack, but rather than lunge in to interject as he would usually, he quietly snorted at the conversation, and turned to face the lake. "Let's go *swimming*," it seemed he almost said to himself.

The others heard him, and by the shift in their posture, it was clear they realized a swim did make more sense than further speeches about language, but first David was going to rest his case. Deftly anticipating the direction in which Cody had been aiming to steer the argument, he conceded Mick's point about language, but then countered by saying, "You're not seeing the point. Even if what you are claiming about language is true, Buber is talking about something more primordial. It isn't a linguistic encounter," he explained. As was his habit, David was seeking to find a middle space, one somehow preserving a space for genuine human meaning without endorsing the existence of a soul and God, yet at the same time resisting the idea that everything was as if nothing. As for Jack, his enthusiasm for the speculative metaphysics of early modern rationalism notwithstanding, he was sometimes inclined to claim that human experience was just events in a central nervous system. So long as the grandeur of the logical and mathematical worlds were given their due credit, Jack didn't care so much about whatever else the others wanted to erase from their own ontological ledgers of reality. David knew all this. For Jack, Cody, Mick, and Tony, it had become second nature for them in discussion to discard themselves, and everything they experienced, for the sake of their preferred system. Sensing he was outnumbered, and that there was no way of pleasing anyone with his observation about Buber, David stood up, and as if it had been his original suggestion, said exasperatedly, "Oh, forget it. Let's go down for a swim." Everyone walked down to the shore, left their towels on the white sand, and got in.

The water was much warmer than they expected. Mick and Cody straightaway dove all the way in, and started kicking to reach the point where the bottom would give out beneath them, and they would be able to tread. Karl was already floating on his back nearer to shore, while Jack, David, and Tony were standing waist deep, skimming their hands along the surface of the water, occasionally splashing each other. Clara and Paul surfaced the farthest out, having swum out together as far as they could holding their breath.

He stood in the water to his knees, pausing momentarily to take in the scene. Raising his hand for a visor, he stared up at the clouds above. On the opposite shore of the lake, perhaps a hundred yards away, was a cove whose lily pads caught his attention. It might be worth walking over to later, assuming there was a road or trail.

To his right, on the water's edge, stood a sturdy lifeguard tower. As a strong swimmer in a placid lake, he didn't feel any danger, but he supposed it was regulation that demanded there be one. It must have been the juxtaposition he noticed between the mood of tranquility at the lake and the thought of the general possibility of drowning that led him in turn to think about how, for others at different times and places than this one, it had been in the water that they'd met death. Unexpectedly, his mind turned to the time when as a child his friend's father, Ken, would read stories to them before bed. One evening when they were eight, he read from the novel *Snow Falling on Cedars*. He remembered being in the upper bunk riveted by Ken's solemn voice reading the novel's harrowing account of Ishmael Chambers's experience storming the beach as a young Marine at Tarawa. As he had understood at the time, his friend's father was

trying to teach them raw lessons about life. The father knew, for instance, how they were young and liked to play war and glorify it, so he thought he would disabuse them of their fantasy, by showing that war was not beautiful at all. More importantly, the father knew how from school they thought their country was a land of freedom and justice, so he thought he would show them that the Japanese-Americans had been treated wrongly during the war. Is being forcibly relocated to an internment camp freedom? Before reading the novel to them that night, Ken had at some point already told them stories about how, when he himself had been a boy, he and his older brothers would explore the Oxnard dunes, where they would find old expended naval munitions in the sand. They didn't truly appreciate it at the time, he explained, that those shells had been designed to kill others. For what? We were told, he said, that the bombs and bullets had been made to keep us free, but there wasn't any freedom for those who had been sent to the internment camps, was there? As he would listen to his friend's father explain his vision of how the world really worked, he remembered watching his face twist into anger when he began recounting how his own father and others had been rounded up by the government and sent away. Hearing it as a young boy, he never doubted that the experience of injustice his friend's father related had been bad. Still, he felt like the bitterness he saw in the man wasn't really because of Manzanar. Manzanar, it seemed to him, had given his friend's father the excuse he was looking for to be bitter. The anger he had for the world was a way of avoiding addressing his anger with himself. He wondered if the father knew this about himself, and knew what was really causing it.

Standing in the water, he nevertheless saw the element of wisdom in the man's flawed observations. It didn't make sense to say we had fought for freedom. About that there could be no doubting he was correct. Setting aside the fact that not every American was free while the country was said to be fighting for freedom, there was the further question about what really would have happened, if those we had been told were our enemies had won. When he was a child, the answer he would hear at school was simple. "Good thing we won the war, else we'd all be speaking Japanese or German right now," people would say on the Fourth of July, as the old phrase had it. But so what, though? Germans didn't mind speaking German, just like Japanese didn't mind speaking Japanese. If we spoke something besides English, we'd speak it fine. He imagined for a moment the lifeguard's perch being a prison camp tower run by the Gestapo. If it were, what would that change about the present moment? As long as they were still able to swim, it didn't matter what language the lifeguard spoke, or what language he and his friends spoke. Was freedom, then, just being able to go swimming?

He thought about how swimming here today was, for him, an indulgence. Many lives on earth in history had elapsed from cradle to grave without leisure. And anyway, for his teacher's grandfather from the *Indianapolis*, for instance, being here at the lake would be a terror. None of the thoughts he was having seemed to crystalize into anything profound or perceptive. All he knew is that he felt somehow unworthy of existence, guilty that for him life was so easy, that he could swim here in the lake without having to fear being carted off to Manzanar, or blown to bits by a mortal shell on the beach at Tarawa, or eaten by sharks out in the Pacific. There had

been so much sacrifice, so much of it meaningless too, for him to be here in these circumstances, able to stand under the bright sun and clouds. He thanked God for being alive, for being here, and dove under.

Chapter 5

When he surfaced from the water, it was near the diving platform. Mick and Jack did some somersaults, as Paul clapped his hands, and the others looked on. After a few more rounds of diving, Mick and Jack swam back to join the formation that everyone had formed halfway between the shore and the platform. They played games, seeing who could hold his breath the longest, who could plunge all the way to the bottom, or who could tread the longest with his arms held in the air. There was splashing and laughing. By the time they were finally finished swimming and came to shore to gather their belongings, they were tired.

Tony walked to the fire pit and was changing into pants, while Paul and Clara were busy fetching something out of the car. "Hey," he called to the others now beginning to walk to the campsite also. "Did you guys see the other beach over there?" He pointed to the cove he had noticed earlier. Jack and David both nodded indifferently, and turned to walk back to the campsite to join Tony and Paul and Clara. Mick and Cody, though, obviously had been thinking about the other shore as well, because their attention brightened when he mentioned it. But it was Karl who looked particularly intrigued. Everyone could tell when Karl had become smitten with some idea, which, no matter how impractical or inconvenient, he would see to accomplishing. Recognizing the mood, Mick and Cody seized on his euphoria, and started egging him on. "Do it, Karl. Swim out there. It's pretty far. I bet you can't." The four of them stopped on the beach, forming a line parallel to the waterline, and stared out to the far shore. It was shaping up to be a race, they realized. But just before there would be no turning back, Mick laughed nervously, "You guys are crazy. I'm going to get something to eat." Cody waffled for a second, then turned to follow Mick. Karl watched them walk away, and then looked at him, saying, "Well, guess it's just us." Thinking Karl was still sincere about following through, he stepped into the water. He was about to dive. "Wait! What are you doing? I was just kidding." He looked to see Karl shaking his head, and turning to catch up with the others.

Suddenly, he realized he had been frightened, though he hadn't noticed it till Karl had interrupted him. There was no reason to be scared, though, he told himself. It was some distance, but nothing unmanageable, he reminded himself. He sighed deeply, told himself he may as well see what happens, and so he began swimming, at first using his legs mainly in order to conserve his arm strength for later. As he passed the platform, he flipped over to have a look back at the shore. Everyone at the fire pit was watching. He waved a hand to them all, but nobody waved to him. So far, at least, it was fairly easy going, so he saw no point in stopping now. He kept swimming, now using his arms too as he lied on his back to kick. The water began changing, first from its original translucent green to dark blue, and then again to a very dark

blue. Soon he couldn't even make out the shape of his own body beneath the surface. There was no telling how deep the water was now, and the thought of alligators and snakes began crossing his mind. He didn't think there were any alligators in the park, but he started to worry, when it occurred to him that perhaps he had seen a warning sign about them when they had driven through the front gate. As he got closer to the cove's shore, his fear intensified, so badly, in fact, that by the time he reached the lily pads that had seemed so beautiful and alluring from the beach, he couldn't wait to be done with them. Just as he was thinking that the hardest stretch of the swim would be over, his arms began snagging against the weeds and other plants. There was some type of thick grass wrapping around his hands and arms, and which was making it hard to continue stroking. It was too shallow to float or kick his legs, but still too deep to stand easily. The water was splashing up his nostrils. In a flash, he realized that he might be drowning, even though he was so close to shore. Thinking about sharks off and on all day was not helping, either. He felt he would be in the teeth of an alligator any second dragging him down into the weeds, never to be seen again. He pulled himself through the last of the lily pad death trap, and washed onto the sand.

He didn't know how long he had been swimming aside from the fact that it had taken longer than he'd anticipated it would. And he understood that the others had been reasonable not to attempt the swim. Above all, he knew they would be angry that he had, and because he didn't want to anger them any more than he knew they'd already be, when he stood up to walk off the beach, he made sure not to look across the lake at them, lest it be perceived as gloating. He knew they had seen him make it.

He cut through some light shrubbery into the pines, still struggling to catch his breath. There was a gravel road heading in the general direction of the main entrance. He figured he could follow it for as long as it let him hug the shore and keep the destination in sight. Judging by the sun, it was probably around four, so he didn't have to be in any rush to get to the camp. They'd be at the park a while before having to leave. He took a breath and tried to calm down.

Typically, it wouldn't have been an issue, since he would have taken care of it while still in the lake, but in the initial effort to swim out, and then the frenzy that arose close to shore, he found it necessary to step behind a tree and attend to business. As he was urinating, he tried to avoid hitting any of the ants he saw marching along the tree on route to their fortress kingdom somewhere in the brush. He was not a Jansenist by any stretch, but he always had instinctively disliked killing bugs senselessly. He never had understood the mentality of others whose natural response to seeing a bee, or a spider, or whatever, was to kill it. Thinking about it, people crush bugs without remorse mainly just because they are small. But that didn't make any sense. Why was it okay to crush another creature simply because it happened to be small? He surmised that people's reasoning was that, because a bug was small, it probably didn't have a consciousness, or at least not any sentience of substantial significance. But that was an obvious leap in logic. He didn't mean to criticize those who kill bugs thoughtlessly, but he did think that, here again, they were being dishonest with themselves. After all, if a race of massive

giants came to earth, it wouldn't be any defense on their part to claim they were justified in squashing humans because humans were tiny to them. A human being's life would remain exactly what it is now, no matter how big a giant came along to observe it.

The more he considered it, he was sure his views about bugs implied he shouldn't eat meat, and while he didn't begrudge vegetarians himself, he did find the outspoken among them irritating. He found them annoying, not so much because he thought they were mistaken to say eating meat was bad, but because, if one looked, one was sure to discover any number of inconsistencies and hypocrisies in their own lives and beliefs. There were probably many vegetarians, for instance, who didn't have the slightest qualms about squashing a bug when one happened to crawl up their arm, or tried to land on their head.

In the final analysis, he supposed, it was possible to view all of existence as God's creation, a natural cathedral, which probably rendered the majority of what everyone ordinarily does wrong, he concluded. When he had been younger, he had entertained the idea of entering a monastery. His father encouraged it, because he thought it was impossible for a man to go wrong when he honestly followed his heart, but his mother kept that thick silence she would whenever she meant to discourage somebody whom she thought was doing or saying something crazy. As he sauntered along the road winding through the trees, he accepted that he was not a monk, and that almost certainly he would never be, but he didn't think it was so strange to consider the possibility that everyone could be less cavalier in the way they kill bugs.

By now, the walk was taking longer than he had anticipated it would. Apparently, the swim had traversed a far greater distance than he had judged. When he finally reached the campsite, he had been gone for long enough that it was like stepping into a home village that had forgotten its son, having taken the old traveler for dead or missing. Nobody looked up to say a word. He grabbed a chair from the bench, set it down in the ring with the others, and tried to orient himself with respect to where the conversation had led without him. After what must have been one of their collective exchanges replete with its typical twists and turns, asides and digressions, clarifications and qualifications, questions and assertions, wisecracks and insults, there was no way of knowing the precise details of what had been said. At any rate, perhaps it didn't matter, since by then, nothing seemed to have changed. They were back to Buber.

Chapter 6

"Okay, cool. See you all there," he said to them, as he turned to the street, the backyard behind him. After pulling in to the garage at Paul and Clara's place earlier, they had unpacked the coolers and chairs, thrown out the trash, and settled the plans for the night. After a brief set of collective deliberations, it had been decided that they could all go home, shower and change, and still have time to meet there by ten or eleven. Paul suggested Rudyard's, but nobody was in the mood for something quiet, so they'd reconvene at the same bar he'd been at Tuesday. The

schedule would be tight, but probably there would be a big enough table available for them all, hopefully one outside. With the outdoor patio in the back, which previously had been a large residential backyard, renovated recently, the crowds were growing larger in size and intensity the last few weekends. The word was out that this was the place to be. It was to the point that there were now long lines at the front door and standing room only both inside and outside. It was sure to be jammed tonight. "If you get there first, get me two rounds of Tecate and whiskey!" Jack called out to him. Jack didn't like crowds, which meant ordinarily he would never be going out like this on a Saturday night to the bar, but it being the special occasion it was with Mick's birthday, and the fact that everyone else would be there, even Karl was going, he was making an exception. Jack didn't want to be left drinking at his house alone, so it would be necessary to tag along with the group. And if Jack couldn't help it being busy, he would have to plan accordingly. "Will do," he replied, turning his head back to Jack in the yard.

Leaving the house, he was aware that there was less banter than before when in the afternoon they had been preparing to head for the lake. It wasn't just that everyone was now tired, he knew. There was a lingering tension, as evidently the swim across the lake had ruffled some feathers, particularly with Cody, but because everyone could not deny that the entire thing really was nothing to be upset about, the ice was melting somewhat, and by the time they got to the bar, everything would be in fine shape again, he thought. To try to help soothe things, then, he had decided to walk home rather than to ask anyone for a ride, hoping to avoid the appearance of being rude by choosing not to inconvenience them all. It was only a mile or two anyway, and it would take him through the city's Museum District, which he liked. He always enjoyed the sight of the homes surrounding his apartment, with their royal oaks and rolling lawns.

Understanding his gesture's rationale, Clara had nodded to him, as if to so say thank you, but she didn't say it aloud for fear of infuriating Cody, whom she knew would see it as a betrayal. He walked down the driveway to the sidewalk. Tony was behind him on the way to his car. "Sure you don't need a ride, dude?" Tony asked.

"Oh, no, don't worry about it. I'll be fine. Thanks, though." He meant what he said, as did Tony. And yet, there was still that inevitable awkwardness everyone feels when both souls know one is being relieved of the opportunity to do a nicety.

When he reached the empty lot on the corner overgrown with weeds, Tony's car stopped at the intersection. He saw the left turn signal begin flashing. "See you later," Tony waved out the window. The car turned left, and he went right, walking along the sidewalk. It was after dinnertime, so when he reached the first main street, its restaurants were empty, but it was still early enough in the evening for the bars to be empty too. The streets were quiet, and he liked it.

Two blocks from home, he walked past a big empty lot whose large estate was recently demolished. He thought about what it would be like, to have the money to buy a mansion like that, knock it down, and build a new one. He wasn't envious of the lifestyle. Just curious. In

fact, simply imagining what it would be like for it be his own made him shudder a little. As undeniably beautiful as the houses in the neighborhood were, they all had a certain despair about them, as if they were more so mausoleums than homes. Tombs for the living dead, monuments to frustrated desire, he thought to himself. He then recalled that Carrell, his advisor, mentioned at one point how he and his wife Laura had purchased a new property in the neighborhood. They were excited to be designing their dream home entirely from scratch, Carrell told him. This must be the place, then. He leaned against the fence, putting his hands through the chain links, and stared at the pit of dirt where the workmen would soon begin laying the foundation.

His nearby apartment complex, which certainly wasn't exclusive or expensive, was a relic from the fifties, a historic property that in all likelihood would soon be demolished by developers looking to attract all the young professionals from the Northeast who were beginning to relocate for their company jobs that had been opening offices here. But for now, the building stood. As he arrived, he nodded to three of his neighbors who were drinking iced tea in the courtyard. "Beautiful," he said pointing to the sea of white clovers that had sprouted in the yard with the week's rain. "Yes, it's easy to forget they're weeds," one of the women said laughingly. He went inside.

"Dude, come in here. I have to show you something." It was Timothy waving his arm, standing outside his unit down the hall. He had a huge knowing smile on his face, like the Cheshire cat, suggesting a supreme confidence that what he was about to show would be worth seeing. He checked his phone for the time, and seeing it was now nine-thirty already, decided that there would be no time to shower. He would throw on a collared shirt before he and Timothy left for the bar—judging by his friend's demeanor, it appeared safe to assume he would want to come. "One second," he answered Timothy. He stepped into his apartment, put on a blue button-down, grabbed a sixpack from the kitchen, locked his door, and walked down the hall to where Timothy stood waiting.

Timothy slapped his back as they walked in. Since the last time he had been there, his neighbor had rearranged the furniture completely, consolidating everything, including his bed, into the living room. It would be difficult to walk through the clutter, so he managed to plop himself down on a bean bag chair in the corner. Timothy took a seat on the bed, and grabbed a remote. A video on the wide screen hanging on the wall began playing. A fit elderly Italian man, dressed in traditional Japanese Samurai attire, swung a large blade inside his flat, performing a series of impressive technical moves with his sword to the accompaniment of a dramatic drumming soundtrack. "Isn't that so awesome?" Timothy asked when it ended. It was an interesting performance, no doubt, but nothing nearly worthy of the absolute awe with which Timothy was treating it. His friend must have been smoking marijuana, he saw. "Yeah, that's cool. Want a beer?" he said, trying delicately to change the subject. Timothy leapt from the bed, grabbed two, cracked one open, chugged it down, dropped the can on the floor, and then, without looking, fell backwards onto the bed, as if he were cave jumping. "Woooooo," he exclaimed.

He thought about extricating himself, to leave for the bar alone. But then he felt guilty at the idea, and, deciding it might be good for Timothy to get out of the apartment, he mentioned everyone's plan to meet at the bar. "Want to go?" he asked Timothy. "Oh, yeah, definitely, man. Lemme get ready." He was already dressed, so it wasn't clear what exactly he intended to do. He stood up and walked over to a desk at the window. Fumbling through the drawers, eventually he pulled out a chess board. "It's going to be super busy tonight. I don't think there'll be room for the board," he said diplomatically to Timothy. He could see Timothy momentarily escape his false euphoria, a look of clarity came over his face, and although there was embarrassment in his eyes, his friend seemed relieved to be calm. Timothy looked gently at him, "Yes, thanks. Good point. We can play later tonight when we're back." He himself wasn't a good chess player, and so the matches were always preordained Timothy victories, but at least playing gave them something good to do together, and it helped Timothy put his mind on something concrete, where for a time he could collect himself, and come back to the world.

He had once seen a friend in college descend into schizophrenia, and he worried that potentially that was happening here. It occurred to him how, although society would classify Timothy's behavior as mad, and it was mad, surely there was no disputing it, there was something profound to him in the fact that a burgeoning madman was the one who could see, clearer than everyone, the irrationality of what those around them accepted as normal, but wasn't normal at all. A remark he'd read somewhere about madness came to mind: "The veils of universal occlusion seem to part and penetrating truths are manifested ... The beginning of certain mental disorders by shattering metaphysical revelations..." He thought that was Jaspers. In any case, the two insanities were different, of course, each capable of unmasking the other for what it was. He wondered what reality truly was, if neither Timothy's perception nor the everyday world which Timothy rightly saw to be phony, were it. Was everything an illusion? Even though the conclusion seemed to force itself on him presently, he resisted it, recalling his earlier thoughts about it from Tuesday which he believed then had shown otherwise. Perhaps reality was refusing to get drawn into either illusion, to resist the delusion that the everyday was rational, on the one hand, but to also resist the dissolution that came with rejecting it in the fashion Timothy was, on the other. As to where exactly recognizing the world was a lie was supposed to leave him, he was unsure. The line about existing from Kierkegaard sprang to his mind, "to remain out over the deep, over seventy thousand fathoms..."

"Ready. Let's go," Timothy said. He walked through the door, Timothy's footsteps plodding behind him. When they reached the building door, he glanced back, and saw Timothy's door had been left ajar. He pointed, Timothy looked and laughed, and said, "Oh, yeah, whatever, don't worry about it. It'll be fine." His friend put on a goofy face, and started to pretend to prowl around the hallway, the impersonation suggesting that anyone interested in breaking into his apartment and stealing something from him was only an imbecile worth mocking. For a moment, he seriously thought that, in order to prove his indifference's sincerity, Timothy might start stacking up all his belongings outside the doorway in the hallway. As they walked outside, Timothy dropped the remaining beers from the sixpack on the table where the other neighbors were sitting. It could have been a nice gesture, but in this case, it misfired badly, since Timothy, already preoccupied with whatever was flying through his mind, failed to

notice they were drinking iced tea, and not alcohol, for a reason. Too embarrassed to say no thank you, they all smiled uncomfortably, and told Timothy and him to have fun. For a second, he thought about telling Timothy he had changed his mind, and turning around and just going to bed. He wasn't sleepy, but suddenly he was tired and felt like being alone.

Chapter 7

The walk to the bar was short, and it felt so too, having Timothy there talking to distract him. Or, nearly distracting him. The sudden fatigue which had overtaken him back at the apartment was fading, but not yet fully. He felt an immense indifference to the night that lay ahead, to everything, frankly. He wondered why, if he in one sense had no desire to be doing what he was doing, he then did it. Then again, maybe he was doing what he desired to do. After all, he was doing it. Was it even coherent to posit the notion of doing something he didn't desire to do? If he didn't desire to do it, then why did he do it?

As he thought he detected the mood finally beginning to scatter to the winds, he wondered whether there was truly a metaphysical mystery here, or whether he was simply being taken in by some sort of semantic confusion at work in the use of the word "desire." There were those, of course, some of his friends among them, who would assert the problem was dissolvable entirely in another way, since according to them, there was in principle no difference between doing something one desired, and doing something contrary to what one desired, since what anyone did do wasn't up to anyone anyway, the experience of free choice being nothing more than an illusion. "When I deliberate the die is already cast..." Was that Murdoch, he wondered? Then he quickly admonished himself for that bad habit of always seeking to label a thought of his with the name of someone else. The train of reflection proceeded. Go to the bar, and he will regret it, do not go to the bar, and he will regret it—either way, he will regret it, and either way, he is mistaken for doing so, since as there is no real choice, it is foolish to regret doing anything at all. Hence, when one really thought it through, it follows that the illusion of agency was itself a license to exercise it, not however one pleased, since technically on this view nobody did exercise agency anyway, but, well, setting that little difficulty aside, the point was simply not to worry about anything, much less regret it, since it didn't really matter. His mind turned to a class he'd taken once on Kant, Hegel, and Nietzsche as an undergraduate. Phil Mikovitz, the instructor, who had spent his younger years at Dartmouth, told them all a funny story meant to illustrate the *aporia*. Mikovitz recounted to them the story of how one time, on the last day of the quarter, a student streaked naked through the room exclaiming, "I'm free! I'm free! See, I'm free!" When the student ran out, he turned to the class and said, "That doesn't prove anything other than he was determined to do it." When Mikovitz told the story, everyone erupted into laughter. In retrospect, he realized his teacher probably had made up the whole story, but at least the apocryphal streaker had been used to illuminate an interesting point about the problem of free will.

He thought about asking Timothy whether or not he thought they were free, but then decided not to ask. Maybe he would bring it up later, when they were all at the bar.

Rather than pass through the park with the fountain, they came up the street from another direction. Just as they all expected at Paul and Clara's, there was already a huge line forming, stretching down to the next lot's car repair shop. The doorman was ordering the line to form in that direction rather than the other, in order to try to minimize noise from reaching the house immediately next door, which was a residential home, and whose occupants' patience must understandably be wearing thin. The bar had been receiving noise complaints on the weekends for good reason, and there were rumors circulating about how the fire marshal was going to be sent out at some point, as the crowd greatly exceeded what the city occupancy laws allowed. The resulting situation, which looked exactly like what happens when trying to cram the equivalent of a wild music festival into a modest two-story house, was a bubble about to burst, and everyone could feel it, which was only adding to the sense of urgency to savor it while it still lasted. Most likely, this would be the last weekend before the authorities would have to shut it down, and things would have to go back to normal.

The bass thumping from the stereo out in the back made it difficult to hear anything even out front. Timothy began walking by those waiting in the line, heading to grab a spot at the end of it, which was all the way to the repair shop's parking lot. "Hey, wait a second, Timothy," he said, though he couldn't tell whether his words were heard. Looking up to the door from the foot of the stairs, he recognized the doorman who was checking IDs. It was not the same doorman from Tuesday, but another one, Rusty, a gregarious roughneck who worked out on the oil rigs in the Gulf and at the bar parttime. They weren't close enough to be friends, but they had a rapport. He could tell Rusty saw working at the bar as temporary, and though Rusty never said so, he thought that Rusty respected that he appeared to have no intention of becoming a lifer here, either. Maybe Rusty himself was oblivious to it, but he thought the fact Rusty always wore a simple white shirt was not just a matter of style, or that, more exactly, to the extent it was so, it was a sign, whether he realized it or not, that he wanted to be pure, that he believed the light was stronger than the darkness. He had met plenty of people, particularly in academia, who wore black shirts regularly for what seemed to him the purpose of expressing the opposite sentiments. As Rusty ushered in one group, he turned to look to see whose turn was next. Rusty saw him. "Hey man, what's up," Rusty said. He smiled, and nodded toward the open door. It just so happened that Timothy was looping back to the front of the line, curious as to what was going on, and saw they were being waved through. "Oh, awesome. Let's go." Timothy sprinted up the stairs, threw his arms up when he reached the landing, striking the pose of an Olympic champion. Rusty chuckled, and shook their hands. The two walked in together, happy to have avoided the wait.

A few girls who had come in right behind them tried grabbing Timothy's attention, assuming the fact Timothy had been waved in like that meant he could get them free drinks. Timothy stopped to chat with them near the door, which itself was near the staircase leading upstairs, but he began stammering, losing his train of thought, as he was jostled by the volume of people streaming up and down the stairs. He gently tapped Timothy on the shoulder, nodded quickly to the girls, and led his friend to the counter. Billy was working along with a number of others.

“Four Tecates and whiskey, please,” he told Billy.

“Sorry, we don’t have Tecate,” Billy said.

“Okay, Lone Star then.”

Timothy raised his eyebrows. “Double-fisting it tonight?” he said.

“No, one round for you, and one for me, and two for Jack. He asked me to order for him when we got here,” he explained. After he spoke, he realized Jack and Timothy may not yet have met before, but he could see that Timothy wasn’t interested in saying more anyway, so they grabbed their beers and whiskey, pressed them against their chests, and squeezed through the crowd to the side exit leading to the back patio.

They were just in time. Only one table still was open. They took a seat across from one another, their elbows against the fence. They placed their other drinks next to their sides to signal the spots next to them were taken too. If anyone asked whether the rest of the table were open, they would say no. It would hold off others from the crowd for a while, but if their friends didn’t show up shortly, they would have to hand the other seats over.

He felt his phone vibrate. “Plans tonight?” It was Rebecca. Maybe she wanted to see him, or maybe she just wanted to test whether he did, but in any event, it was immaterial, since he had no intention of deviating from his resolution not to pursue things. It seemed like only trouble. “Who’s that?” Timothy asked. “Some girl. Not going to answer. She’ll probably end up here tonight, anyway.” Odds were that if one of Rebecca’s friends, like the one from Tuesday night, saw them here at the bar, they would report back to her, and some kind of encounter would inevitably follow. He wondered whether Timothy might like her, in which case he could introduce them, but then he reminded himself that Timothy wasn’t in any condition to be meeting someone when he was barely hanging on at the hospital. He looked at the crowd and wondered how many other people there tonight were like that, fundamentally in no condition to be here, but still there anyway. He felt like he wasn’t among them, but he had to admit they probably thought the same about themselves. So how was anyone to know?

Although he didn’t think it was always an excuse for anyone’s behavior, he did think much of the dysfunction in everyone’s lives plausibly could be traced to childhood trauma. It only made sense, he thought. Just because an experience was no longer figuring as an occurrent thought in consciousness, or as a recurrent conscious one, or even simply as a potential one, didn’t seem to him to forbid it from structuring somebody’s subsequent encounter with the world. He had not read Freud or Lacan extensively, but from what he had picked up from others about psychoanalysis, it sounded like there was something to it. An experience from childhood was retained in memory, not in the way that a document lying in a filing cabinet waiting to be retrieved is retained, but in the more primordial sense that, once it had entered someone’s consciousness, it leaves its mark, like a wound that bears a seal, and then, receding into oblivion, it would always be there, if only to be operating behind our backs,

as it were. He personally never had gone to see a therapist, and he had no desire. He would not say so to others, because he knew it would be unkind, but he had a visceral suspicion of those who went to therapy. He conceded to himself the potential inconsistency on his part, since if he was sympathetic to the psychoanalytic suggestion that the unconscious structures much of our interpretation of the world, in principle he shouldn't be hostile to the idea that psychotherapy could be good for helping somebody manage whatever that meant in their lives. Though he couldn't articulate the thought convincingly, he felt like, if had to try, his basic feeling was that there is a better way to deal with whatever therapy attempted to address than therapy.

When he was younger, his mother would complain about her sisters, telling him that only losers and quitters went to therapists; maybe that was why he had developed the antipathy to it he did. But although his mother's comment may have been too sweeping a generalization, he did concede that her assessment captured what he had seen anecdotally.

His thought turned to a time when he was ten or so. It was a summer afternoon at his best friend's house. His friend's mother came into the room to interrupt their playing, telling him that he would have to go home, because his friend had a therapy appointment. He remembered being unsettled. He had not known his friend was going to a therapist, he didn't really know what a therapist even was, but he felt sure that his friend's mother seemed to have a strange need to mention it the way she did. He went home worrying about what possibly could be wrong with his friend. The most disconcerting thing of all, really, was that his friend seemed perfectly fine. He felt at the time, as he still felt thinking about it here years later, that his friend being sent to therapy was more to do with his friend's mother's problem, than it ever had anything to do with his best friend.

Sitting at the crowded bar, he suddenly could see the insecurity and the pain from childhood etched on the faces of all those around him. Time didn't obliterate it. It was there, just in ways that weren't always obvious. His same childhood best friend, for instance, had moved to New York City a few years ago in order to finish his college schooling. He told everyone he was there to study marketing, but secretly his friend confided to him what anyone could already see anyway, that he was there to break into the entertainment industry. The ambition was not preposterous, as if he were proposing jumping to the moon. From the time they were boys, everyone saw he was a very gifted artist. His father, Ken, the one who read to them about Tarawa, was himself a sculptor who owned an art studio. By that measure, he was a success. But his friend's mother was never satisfied with her husband, and he remembered how she would openly comment about the family's finances, as a way to suggest to others that what her husband did was impractical, maybe even selfish. From the time they were young, she steered her son away from art, pressuring him to do something else. Marketing, in truth, he thought, was simply his friend's way of appeasing his mother, as he sought out what he really wanted to do.

His friend wouldn't tell anybody, but he wanted to be an actor, or maybe a model, but although he was extremely handsome, with dreamy brown eyes and a square jaw, he was too short. The first time he visited him in New York City, his friend told him how everyone at the

parties had been saying he could be a model, if only he weren't short. They had meant to compliment him, but it was only understandable it hurt him to hear it. Then there was a stint where he and someone else tried working on a screenplay. Around that same time, he even landed a job working as a production assistant on a Scorsese film. He had seen the pictures from the set of his friend having a squirt gun fight with Leonard DiCaprio and the rest of the crew. The film dream faded not long after, though, without his friend giving any explanation. And ever since, it had been office jobs.

Those in New York City who did not know his friend's childhood could in a way not know him, because they would not know his ambivalent relation to art due to his father's journey as an artist, and would not know his mother's attempts to guilt him into taking a different path. To those who thought they knew his old friend, he currently went by the nickname Moto, and that was who they thought he was. But they had no idea of how many times he had tried reinventing himself, or of how all those failed attempts at self-transformation stemmed from a hidden conflict within himself, and which he would never tell anyone. The exception, he thought, was a therapist. His friend would tell a therapist. Perhaps therapy, then, he concluded, was the setting where people felt able to discuss who they really were, or wanted to be, since everything else about their adult everyday lives had for them become little more than playing a role. "The mass of men lead lives..." We traumatized children in big bodies, he concluded.

Chapter 8

"Are these seats taken?" There was frustration in the man's voice asking, which was reasonable, of course. It was only eleven forty-five, and though the bar was the sort of place that never was bustling fully until after midnight, with its swelling popularity in recent weeks, tonight it was already over capacity. There was hardly any room to stand, and everyone was eyeing the table. It wouldn't be long before a group tired of seeing the space go to waste took it. As Timothy and he were about resigned to giving up, Paul came barging out the side door, ambling down the rampway, a handful of beers in hand. Clara and Jack emerged as well, and then, a second later, Mick too. The four of them pushed through the bodies surrounding the table, and sat down, Mick and Jack next to him, Paul and Clara next to Timothy. No one had met his neighbor, and it took them all a moment to realize Timothy was with him. He was about to introduce them, when Timothy introduced himself, sticking out his hand to each of them in turn. "Hi, I'm Timothy. Good to meet you," he said bashfully. It appeared the mania was subsiding, and that he was serene even.

Timothy's polite gesture went unnoticed. Jack and Mick, both of whom had clearly been drinking heavily before arriving, were bellowing. "For he's a jolly good fellow, for he's a jolly good fellow, for he's..." they sang, as Paul joined in, "a jolly good felloooow, which noooobody can deny!" Amused with themselves, they high fived each other, Jack wheezing as much from the smoking as the laughing. When there was a break in the shenanigans, he offered Jack the two rounds of Lone Star and whiskey he had bought. It took Jack a moment to recognize his earlier request. "Oooh, awesome, thanks man." Jack took a sip of the beer. "Ugh," he said

wincing, "it's lukewarm." He didn't remind Jack that they all were late. And Jack didn't seem to notice it was Lone Star rather than Tecate.

When they were this inebriated, Paul would adopt the identity of a character he had invented, an alternate personality, who spoke with a quiet raspy voice and mumbled perverted ramblings. It was a performance that would always embarrass Clara more than it probably should. She called it "Uncle Paulie" when it appeared, and if the past were any reliable indication, by the looks of it, Uncle Paulie would be making an appearance very shortly. There was not anything particularly grating about Paul's recurring joke, he thought, and although it was undoubtedly immature, that wasn't especially off-putting either. If he thought about it, the bothersome thing was the fact that there was something sad about it. Having to watch Paul slip into Uncle Paulie was like being forced to watch a depressed clown making dark jokes about himself. The self-loathing in it was too much.

He didn't notice David's arrival until he was standing at the end of the table. He looked at the seating arrangement, rubbing his chin ironically, as if in deep thought, and then plopped down next to Paul, patting him on the back. "I heard from Cody. He and Tony aren't coming. Apparently neither is Karl." The table was stunned, especially Mick, but rather than explain anything about the others' rationale for not coming, David instead leaned forward in order to see Clara fully. With a mordant smile, he said, "Looks like Uncle Paulie is gonna come out tonight, eh, Clara." She rolled her eyes, and the table laughed nervously, including Paul, who, evidently sensing David's sarcasm, tried to lighten the mood by immediately launching into the character.

As the train wreck unfolded, he looked away from Paul, and turned his attention to the large apartment building down the street. Some of the apartment lights were on, especially in the large penthouse suites on the upper floors. He himself had never been inside the Millrose Tower. But he had walked past the place many times. It was an open secret that the luxury apartment building was a notorious hub for energy executives and other wealthy businessmen to keep their mistresses, or to steal away to see prostitutes. Calling to mind his old friend's comments about corporate espionage and blackmail, he realized that many of the sleazy executives who were cheating on their wives there tonight must have no idea they were being filmed surreptitiously, and would not know so, until it was already too late. Then they were forever leverageable, ever susceptible to looking the other way from corruption, since not playing along to get along would consequently lead to an embarrassing disclosure that would mean both personal and professional destruction. Of course, for extortion and blackmail to work, law enforcement would have to be corrupt too, since if it weren't, anyone could simply go to the police, but since blackmail was obviously an effective means of control, evidently the police were indeed rotten, too. That would explain why places like this one could get away with turning a blind eye to the drug-dealing. When everyone was dirty, nobody wanted to report anything to anyone, because there was always the risk that in doing so you might only destroy yourself in the process. He sighed just thinking about the insanity of the scale to the world's corruption, and felt glad that he could more or less keep to himself, and not have to worry

about it. Even though nobody talked about it, he wondered if others knew about it all too, and like him were simply happy to be able to pretend it didn't exist.

He was bored, so he figured he would test it. "Hey guys, what do you think about blackmail?" he asked the table.

"What do you mean?" Mick asked. He laid out what he had in mind.

"That's stuff from the movies. I mean, I'm sure it happens, but it's not common," Jack said.

"How do you know?" he asked Jack, without any edge to his voice.

"Don't be paranoid. Of course, it's not common," Jack replied.

"You didn't answer my question. I asked how you know it's as rare as you think."

David started cackling. "Oh, here we go. Always with the crazy stuff."

"And always with the denial, with you," he fired back. He was getting angry, and he knew David wanted that, since that would be the most effective way to divert everyone from the topic. He didn't think David was naïve enough to believe the world didn't involve the sort of sinister forces Jack was denying it did, and he also didn't think David himself had any connections to them directly, so he decided that there must be some psychological motivation for his playing dumb. It could be something as simple as the fact that, having successfully tweaked Mick, Clara, and Paul since arriving, he was now next on David's list. But there seemed to be more to it.

He decided to test a hypothesis. "You just deny all this stuff, because it would force you to admit the existence of evil," he said to David.

David slapped his knee and laughed. "Why would I want to deny that? I'm the last person who would. Religion scholars deal with the question of evil seriously all the time," he stated.

He had been intending to work his way to the point more slowly, so that when he finally made it explicit, everyone would see that David had no way to wriggle out of it, but since David had already unwittingly made his point for him, he figured he'd say it now. "So, really, you don't dispute that you deny the existence of evil. When you say evil's a question, what you mean is that it's a phenomenon you treat as a scholarly topic of examination, which is just to say you treat it from within a theoretical framework that makes no genuine room for the supernatural existence of evil. And in any case, the upshot is that it's something you ignore practically." He used the word supernatural for a reason, since it would likely negate the response David would want to make.

“Religious studies, like anthropology and other disciplines, approaches things without any commitment to the reality of what it studies. It tries to be neutral.”

“Right. That’s my point. You think you can study evil from a naturalistic framework.”

“Not necessarily naturalistic.”

“Okay, fine. A framework in which the supernatural, as traditionally understood, is rejected.”

“We don’t reject the supernatural per se. What you mean by traditional is probably loaded with a number of assumptions that scholars would challenge, so from a certain perspective, there’s nothing orthodox, or deserving of default acceptance, of what you mean by the supernatural.”

“Do you believe there’s a devil?”

“It depends what you mean.”

“I can tell you what I mean. But first tell me if you believe in a devil, however you understand him.”

“Well, to begin with, I would not refer to the devil as a ‘him.’ I mean, it’s probably already too much of an assumption to refer to the devil as an entity at all, much less a person, much less a male person.”

“So you don’t believe there’s a devil.”

“No, it’s not that simple. Maybe, I do, like Ivan did.”

“Sure, it is. You just gave me a definition of the devil you say you reject as being inadequate to understanding whatever else it is to which you think the concept might properly refer. But the bottom line is that you deny the devil exists. At least as I understand it.”

“Just because I reject a monotheistic, or really Christian, concept of the devil is fine. The devil doesn’t name an entity. It’s just another way of naming...”

“Evil?” he asked. “So, then, I take it that at least you do believe evil exists. In which case it’s simply a question of its scale.” By now, the table was quiet.

“No, that’s not what I said. Here again, it’s more complicated than you’re making it out to be. I probably reject a certain idea of evil you have, but that doesn’t mean I believe there is no evil,” David said.

“So if you admit there’s evil, however you want to define it, then why is everyone acting like Jack has a point when he states it’s somehow inconceivable that things like blackmail, extortion, and systemic corruption exist? If evil is part of the world, then it’s hardly crazy that it would be widespread. So what’s so hard about thinking that kind of stuff is common? Jack said I’m paranoid for thinking it’s common, and I said he didn’t know that. As far as I can tell, after all this arguing, nobody’s any closer now to proving it is uncommon than they were ten minutes ago.”

Timothy, who had been sitting silently the entire time, said dryly, “Obviously there’s evil. There probably even is a devil. What’s the point in arguing? I mean, look around,” he said laughing. His comment was meant to highlight the stupidity of society, not necessarily its wickedness, but the point was the same, that something fundamentally flawed about the world was as clear as day. It was apparent the table wanted to dismiss Timothy’s agreement as being simply due to the fact that they were neighbors, but they could tell Timothy was too smart and independent for that to have been the motivation for his comment.

David, who typically was relatively civil even when he was throwing his barbs, was fuming. He snarled at Timothy, “You’re crazy.” Knowing David was smart enough to have meant exactly what he did in light of Timothy’s subtle, yet still perceivable, mania symptoms, he decided that David had finally crossed the line, and that somebody should cut him to his own heart. It was petty, he knew, but he felt like it had been a long time coming between them, years even, and they may as well now have it out.

“Oh, that’s rich coming from you. ‘You’re crazy’ says the little man who still has to go to a therapist even though he’s pushing forty.” David had never mentioned he saw a therapist, so it struck a nerve when he knew everyone saw that the comment was true. He did see a therapist. And to make it worse, anyone who knew him would say that *of course* he did.

“Oh, big deal. Everyone sees a therapist. There’s nothing to be embarrassed about that. Only dicks think there’s a problem with therapy. That’s all religion is anyway, so what’s the difference? You have God, I have therapy. Same thing. I’m just honest.” David’s attempt to forestall the argument he knew was coming was artful. As usual, he was attempting to set up the terms of the dispute in his favor, so that when the point he knew he couldn’t answer was raised, his prior pronouncement would be in place to serve as a way to deflect the conversation in whatever other direction he judged would be most to his advantage.

“Ah, yes, I see. Since you’ve gone ahead and equated a God-relationship and therapy, now if I say that you wouldn’t need therapy if you knew God, then you can snap back and say that I wouldn’t need God, if I would just accept going to therapy. You’re disturbed, David, but you are clever.” Paul, who by now had lost complete track of the conversation long ago, was huddled up next to Clara, unsure about what to say. Jack was staring into his whiskey. And Mick was angry that the philosophical debate had just ruined his birthday party.

He turned to Mick. “C’mon, Mick. You get to talk philosophy all day today at the lake, and that’s perfectly fine, but now that I do it, I’m a big jerk?”

Mick wanted to say that wasn't the point, that what he had done earlier was different, but he didn't say so, because he realized he wasn't upset now that they were talking philosophy, as if he would have preferred lighter fare. What bothered him was that the entire terms of the debate had changed. Strictly speaking, it was no longer a debate, as they understood one, since it was no longer an item of idle discussion, where everyone amused himself by seeing how his pet ideas performed against those of others. This was no longer that, no longer supposedly questioning for questioning's sake. It was about existing.

Mick was about to say something else, when suddenly he was drawn up short. Till then, they had been deaf to everything but their conversation when, as if from elsewhere, the familiar riff ripping through the entire patio changed that, momentarily hushing everything, and then causing everyone around them to burst into wild cheering. As the thumping and pounding of synthesizers and drums reverberated through the bar's walls, shaking even the tables, including their own, the crowd started to sing along. It was midnight on the dot.

*"You were a child, crawling on your knees toward it
Making mamma so proud
But your voice is too loud*

*We like to watch you laughing
You pick the insects off plants
No time to think of consequences..."*

The song's hypnotic melody pulsed through the yard. Even if they had still wanted to continue the discussion, it was impossible. David got up and headed inside without looking at anyone. Mick and Jack appeared to have forgotten whatever unpleasantness there had been, and were now singing aloud, their arms draped on each other's necks, as they wiggled on their seats, dipping their shoulders.

*"Control yourself
Take only what you need from it
A family of trees wanting
To be haunted*

*"Control yourself
Take only what you need from it
A family of trees wanting
To be haunted"*

Somehow, the yard grew even more crowded, as those from inside came out to sing and dance.

*"The water is warm, but it's sending me shivers
A baby is born
Crying out for attention*

*The memories fade like looking through a fogged mirror
Decision to decisions are made and not bought
But I thought this wouldn't hurt a lot, I guess not"*

There was an overpowering silence, as the entire bar remained suspended in a perfect stillness, the song's slow interlude meandering its way to the final chorus, everyone's arms swaying in the air.

He locked eyes with Clara, who smiled and fluttered her eyelashes, and before she had time to register her surprise that he was not taking the open seat next to her left by Paul who had gone inside to grab her a salted iced margarita, he had plunged into the crowd, leaving her and the table of friends behind.

He got there just as the place erupted one more time to sing in unison, the chorus repeating three times.

*"Control yourself
Take only what you need from it
A family of trees wanting
To be haunted"*

The euphoric mood which had appeared so suddenly, blowing apart the debate back at the table, throwing everyone into a whirlwind, and without doubt earning a flurry of noise complaints meaning the end of nights like these here ever again, suddenly seemed trivial to him. In the heat of the moment, he and everyone there had felt eternal, like nothing would ever end, that they would be young forever in an endless summer. But the jubilation was laced with despair, he knew, and likely so too did everyone else, for it was a synthetic exuberance, a scripted peace. This orgy of enthusiasm was to die on the vine. He very well would have felt deflated, fatigued by the emptiness that had hit him earlier tonight on the way out from the apartment. But now, things were different, and he caught a second wind, not a temporary jolt in the arm, but something more like a rebirth, an epiphany that everything that had happened was over, and now something new, entirely new, was at last finally here.

What he felt looking into her eyes was different, and he knew she felt what he felt too. She blushed noticeably, and her friends, two twins he had never seen before, turned to look at him, having no idea who he was, but seeing that she knew him. He offered his hand, and she grabbed it. It was as if they had always known each other, and they didn't care what anyone else thought about it. By the time they were through the crowd outside and came out the front, he realized he'd forgotten to close out. He hadn't stopped to ask about Justice, either.

Chapter 9

He followed closely behind her, as she entered the park across the street. The moon was bright, and the street lights were on, so it was not dark, but in her black leather jacket, she would fade in and out, as she passed through the shadows. They reached the fountain, listening

quietly for what felt like a long time, but for all he knew may have only been a few seconds. "My name's Alison," she said. He looked at her. "I know that," he said. He could tell she was genuinely surprised he did. He was mystified how she could think he wouldn't have remembered her name. She was incredibly shy, even insecure, for such a beauty.

"People tend not to notice me," she said. It wasn't a complaint, only an observation.

"Yeah, I've noticed that."

"Noticed? What are you talking about? How would you know?" She didn't ask it accusatorily, but with veiled interest, clearly intrigued by the possibility that somebody was seeing something that had always seemed so obvious to her. "The other night, I think it was Tuesday, when you were with—"

"Justice," she said.

"Yes, Justice." He thought she'd be impressed that he didn't avoid his name. "When you two were talking to Billy behind the bar and some of the others at the counter, I noticed that every time you would say something, nobody would respond. It was like you were speaking an inaudible language. I've never seen anything like it before."

"It's been that way my whole life. I don't know why it is," she sighed gently.

He was getting nervous, not sure where things were supposed to go. He barely knew her, but he thought he loved her, though he'd never say it, since it would sound absurd. He would have to wait, though of course he had to admit that there was no way of knowing whether there would be any such opportunity. He was speaking to a girl he'd now spoken to twice, who was already dating somebody. Simply assuming there would be another time to tell her how he felt seemed foolhardy.

He took out a cigarette. "I don't smoke," she said. He went to put the pack away in his pocket. "I want one, though," she added. He gave her the cigarette and handed her the lighter. He always thought it was clichéd to light a girl's cigarette for her. She took a drag, coughed very slightly, and then twirled around, and started walking to the park's magnolia tree.

"This one may be my favorite," he said. He could tell she entertained the idea he may have just been saying so. "Really?"

"Yeah. I live down the street, so I come here often. I like the spot." He chastised himself, mentioning his place was nearby implied more than he wanted to suggest. He felt awkward for a moment. If she took any offense or felt uncomfortable, she didn't show it. "Why do you like the tree?"

"Well, I suppose partly its association. My grandparents had a huge magnolia tree out in their front yard. I used to love climbing it with my cousin on Thanksgivings. They're easy to climb."

She started to shimmy up the trunk, and before he knew it, she was walking along a branch, as easily as a cat. "Wow, I could never do that," he said.

"Try it."

"No, no thanks."

"I thought you said you liked climbing trees."

"I said I like climbing the magnolia tree outside my grandparents' house, when I was a kid. I don't generally climb trees."

"Well, try it this time. It's fun."

"I'll watch you."

"Are you scared of heights?"

"No. I mean, not here in this case. It depends. I'm not afraid of planes, for example. And I'm not afraid of being up in a skyscraper. But I would be afraid of an open ledge, or anything exposed. I guess I'm not afraid unless I think there's a real chance of falling," he concluded. He always thought it was interesting how primal fear could be. He didn't think of himself as somebody afraid to die, but sometimes he would find his heart fluttering or a pit in his stomach, when he suddenly and unexpectedly found himself in bodily danger. Did that mean he really was afraid of death?

"Okay, well, this wouldn't be much of a fall. And I don't think you'll fall, anyway." She had a point.

Realizing that there was no way out, and that he would have to climb, he lifted his arms up, grabbed hold of a branch, swung his legs over the top of it, and dangled on the branch awkwardly, before finally twisting himself up on his stomach. He couldn't stand like she was, but eventually he was able to sit on the limb, with his hand on the trunk for added balance. He could see she wanted to laugh, but because she didn't want to offend him, she wasn't laughing.

He climbed up a few branches higher. "This is as high, as I'll go," he said.

"Perfect," she said. He thought for a second that she had just wanted to learn about him, by seeing how he would handle the challenge. His old friend from California had once told him that girls liked testing guys, that everything for them was a test, even if they didn't always necessarily know they were doing it. Of course, his friend had been single, so he felt at the time that one had to consider the source. Still, something about it seemed right. He thought that maybe she was testing him here, but if she was, it didn't feel like such a bad thing.

They jumped down to the ground. "What do you study?" he asked. He assumed she was a student. "Studio art," she said. "What medium?" "Large-scale charcoal." He thought it was

funny how precise she was, that she would mention it was charcoal of all things. “Why charcoal?” “I dunno, I just like how it looks, and it’s fun to work with.”

“What do you do?” she countered.

“I’m a graduate student.”

“In what?”

“Philosophy,” he said.

“I used to be a philosophy major. Who’s your favorite philosopher?”

For a split second, he thought he’d say himself, but since he knew that would be too conceited and probably wouldn’t make her laugh, he said, “Kierkegaard.”

“Kierkegaard. Hm. I liked Nietzsche.”

He loathed Nietzsche. Once, in a fit of passion, he had told an old teacher of his that Nietzsche was in his opinion the most overrated thinker in the history of philosophy. He realized that he had probably been overstating things when he said it, but given the worship Nietzsche received in some quarters, he did think he was a plausible candidate for among those whose thought’s importance is most consistently overexaggerated.

“I hate Nietzsche,” he said. Hate was perhaps too strong a word, but he wanted to make sure he was being honest with her, so he thought he’d make it clear he wasn’t an admirer.

“How about Kundera?”

“Is he the one who wrote the lightness book?”

“Yes, I love that book.”

“I don’t really like him,” again he was being honest. He hadn’t read Kundera carefully, just once flipped some pages, formed the impression he was a poetic type who basked in his sadness, and decided if he wanted to read something like that, he’d just read Nietzsche. It occurred to him that she liked Kundera, then, for the same reason he didn’t, Nietzsche.

She didn’t seem alarmed that so far they didn’t share a taste in authors, though he could tell she was curious to see how long it might take before they found one.

“Dostoevsky?” he asked.

“Yes, I love him.”

“What’s your favorite novel of his?”

"*The Idiot*," she said. He worried she might think he were lying just to compensate for all the previous misses, but as it happened, that was his favorite too. "Mine, too," he said. "I've always loved the main character," he added.

"Prince Myshkin," she nodded approvingly. He wondered what it was about the Prince she liked, and of course she was right there, so he could simply ask, but asking somehow felt inappropriate. It was almost as if it were too obvious to say, as if one couldn't see it for oneself, there was no point in explaining to anyone, because it was either self-evident or it wasn't.

"You know, apparently of all his novels, that was his personal favorite. He knew it was not in some ways his best, technically, but it had a special place in his heart." He knew for Dostoevsky personally, who believed in beauty's redemptive power, there had been something special about the task, as an artist, to depicting his image of the ideal, beautiful man. For him, of course, that meant depicting a Christ, a staggering undertaking, when he thought about it. He wondered why, though, if she liked Dostoevsky so much, and *The Idiot*, above all, she had a fondness for Kundera and Nietzsche.

"Do you believe in God?"

"I'm not sure," she said. "Do you?"

"Yes," he said. He was waiting for her to ask him if he were a Christian, since that question usually came next. But she didn't.

"How about Hemingway?"

"No, don't like him particularly," she answered. He knew what that must mean.

"So you are a big Fitzgerald fan?"

"Yes! Love Fitzgerald. I don't think it's much of an argument." He agreed, but he conceded that others felt identically about Hemingway as opposed to Fitzgerald. He pointed that out.

"They're dumb," she laughed. He laughed with her too.

"Where are you from? Here?"

"No, I'm from California." He told her a bit about home.

"You?"

"Here. I like it." She paused. "But I was really supposed to go to Reed."

"Why didn't you?"

"My parents. They wanted me to stay close to home," she said.

“What do they do?”

“My mom’s retired. She used to be a lawyer. My dad’s a physicist at the university.”

He thought about making a joke about what he and his father thought about science dorks, but he decided he better not say anything. As an artist, she probably knew what he meant, anyway, without having to say it.

“Yours?”

“Retired. My mom used to work in computers. My dad worked in defense.” Neither item seemed to interest her, so he didn’t say more.

“Siblings?”

“No. You?”

“No brother. Two sisters. They died in a car crash years ago.” At first he almost laughed, because he thought she was playing a joke, but he realized she was being serious.

“I’m sorry.”

“Thanks.”

They were quiet again for an indeterminate time. He thought about making a comment about trees, to take them back to where the conversation started, just so it felt like there had been some coherence, or closure, and so some progress. He thought about saying something about how his favorite kind of tree might be willows.

She had walked over to the fountain and sat down, facing back to the bar. He usually never threw coins in the fountain, but he fumbled for some change, and pulled some out. He handed her a penny, which she tossed in. “You, too,” she said. He flipped in a dime. He sat down beside her, but without touching. They sat in silence for a few minutes, before he gently placed his hand on her knee. She turned to him, and he looked at her. They kissed.

A car pulled up to the bar. “I have to go,” she said. It wasn’t him, but everyone she knew would be wanting to leave soon, so she had to go back inside. “Sandra and Stephanie will be looking for me.”

“The twins?”

“Yeah, they’re my best friends. What about you?”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Your friends. Who are they? I saw you earlier tonight sitting with a bunch of people at the table.” He thought about it for a few seconds. “I don’t have any friends. At least not here.”

“I’ll see you around. I come here a lot,” she said.

“Yeah, so do I.” He wanted to kiss her again, but he didn’t.

She turned around and walked fast back to the sidewalk. Rusty, whom he realized now had probably seen everything, waved her in.

He came home, watched the white clovers flutter in the wind, then went to sleep.

Chapter 10

It was Tuesday, which this week meant meeting Carrell. Originally, the plan was to meet at one o’clock, but due to a pressing conflicting obligation to which Carrell had to attend, they were now slated to meet at three-thirty instead. At the appointed time, he saw his teacher approaching, walking over from his office to the coffee house’s outdoor seating. Carrell was in his late fifties, of moderate height and fit build, with a full head of silver hair. He was dressed comfortably in matching khaki shorts and Birkenstocks. It was hot and humid, and so sweat was drenching his black shirt. Carrell tapped on the table. “Need anything?” he asked, gesturing inside. “No, thank you, I’m all set,” he told Carrell. His coffee was only half full at the moment after drinking more of it than he had intended while waiting, but it still would be enough, since his meetings with Carrell tended to be relatively brief. That would be the case again today. Despite having the heated exchange with David last Saturday night, the reading group to which they belonged was meeting at the graduate pub at four, so he would not be occupying Carrell for more than an hour. He would get through this meeting first, then deal with the awkwardness of seeing David next.

Although Carrell’s demeanor was affable enough walking by just now, he knew to expect an uncomfortable discussion. James Dulas, a friend of his and once Carrell advisee himself, had left the program last year under misty circumstances. His friend’s motivations were never stated explicitly. When James broke the news of his intention to leave the program, his friend started choking up, and had almost broken down in tears. Sitting out here in the sun, only now did he see the significance that it would be at the same coffee house where he had seen James to say goodbye that he would be meeting Carrell, with his own path at a crossroads. The coffee house was the campus spot where everyone made his big decisions. When James announced his own decision to leave, he stressed how he would be glad to be getting back home to Minnesota. He missed the lakes, even the snow. Clearly, he was leaving disillusioned, but he never shared the details as to why precisely. Given the circumstances, it was fair to surmise perhaps things had not ended on the best of terms between Carrell and him, although it was difficult to say to what extent the frayed relationship, assuming it had been so, influenced James to leave. Now, however, seeing what was happening currently with Karl, who was clashing with the program and Carrell directly, the traces of a pattern were emerging, especially assuming if he was to count himself as the third case. In short, from the looks of it, friction with his students was not unprecedented with Carrell.

In the wake, first, of James leaving and then seeing what was happening to Karl, he was seriously contemplating the idea of leaving the program. He had not sorted out all the details in his mind, beyond the extent that he knew he would leave, not in order to abandon graduate school altogether, but simply to transfer. He knew nowhere is a panacea, but somewhere else might be better. He had not told Carrell yet, though he assumed that his advisor would be aware that there was a possibility he would be following James. Perhaps today was the day to mention the possibility. Yesterday, Carrell had sent him the grade for his term paper—B+. In the world of a doctoral program in which grades were a formality, anything below an A- was a catastrophic failure. Carrell, evidently, meant to send him a wake-up call. He lit another cigarette, as he waited.

A minute later, his advisor set down his latte, and took a seat. He placed his pack of cigarettes on the table within easy reach of Carrell—“Cigarette?” Carrell nodded and took one, grabbed the lighter also lying on the table, and lit up. This was the first time in recent memory that Carrell had accepted a cigarette, another indication that the ensuing conversation was shaping up to be delicate. Carrell looked at him. “I read your paper, obviously. I have some additional things to say about it, but first I thought I might give you the opportunity to ask me any questions you might have.” His remark was ambiguous, since it was unclear whether Carrell meant to invite him to ask something philosophically substantive about the paper itself, or to invite a bookkeeping question about the course grade, or both. “No,” he answered.

“Well, first of all, let me emphasize, don’t worry about the grade on the paper. I’ll be giving you an A for the course, nonetheless.” He didn’t care about grades, and he knew Carrell knew that about him, so he continued to hold his tongue, waiting for Carrell to get to the point he must really be working up to making. “I thought the paper was strong, but as you’ll have seen from reading my comments, I have some substantial reservations on a number of fronts.” Carrell paused once again, this time for longer, expecting him to interject. He didn’t know what exactly to say, and he knew there would be a more fitting moment to do so very shortly, so he decided to still hold his peace. Carrell continued, “One issue is strictly topical. This was supposed to be a seminar on Jaspers and Arendt. But your paper doesn’t develop an argument or discussion directly pertinent to the relationship between their thought. We had talked about a number of issues throughout the course of the study that might have provided a suitable topic of analysis, but you did not pursue any of those issues themselves, or the discussions we had on them.” Even though there was now more to be said in reply, this time Carrell’s pause was briefer than before, and it was evident that he was neither expecting, nor desiring, any response. “So, this has put me in a rather difficult situation as a reader, since I want to evaluate the work on its philosophical merits, but there is the expectation that the work itself would be responsive to the issues at hand covered in the independent reading.” This time the pause was the most pregnant yet. Carrell took a long drag of the cigarette that was almost done, tilting his head back to exhale. He was trying to be nonchalant, but clearly the agitation had been building as he spoke. “If you have any thoughts that you’d like to share about any of this, I’d be happy to hear them,” he said, with more than a hint of irritation in his tone.

Before settling precisely on what he would say in reply, he reached for the pack on the table, and lit another cigarette. "Sorry, want one?" he asked Carrell. He was trying to be polite, but this time round Carrell did not interpret it that way. He was miffed at what he perceived as his unnecessary stalling, and, judging by his reddening cheeks, the rage was brewing. There may be an explosion, he saw.

A scene from the coffee shop two years before entered his mind, a time when he was still relatively new here, but had begun to get a sense of who was who. He had been sitting outside on a sunny day just like this one, drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes with Jack and David at one of the other tables. In the midst of a wide-ranging conversation on epistemology, David in the name of Kant had just finished a soliloquy pronouncing the end of speculative metaphysics. Jack, who was fundamentally unconvinced, asserted that, although elements of Leibniz' philosophy were perhaps no longer tenable in light of the critical philosophy, certain key elements of it remained as viable and promising as ever. David was unpersuaded. Right as Jack was about to shift the discussion from sheer epistemology to metaphysics instead, and launch into a thoroughgoing defense of how the Leibnizian doctrine of infinite analysis was itself necessary for grounding the freedom on which Kant's own practical reason's doctrine of the supreme good depends, he attempted to intervene in the debate between Jack and David. Thinking about it now, he could not recall what the specific point had been, maybe something about Heidegger. But he remembered clearly David's reaction, which at the time seemed to come entirely out of the blue, and to have nothing to do with what he had said. "Yeah, yeah, that's Carrell's view." Even at the time, he recognized David meant for the comment to kill two birds with one stone, on one hand, marginalizing the point itself by insinuating it was little more than a new graduate student's regurgitating something he had heard from somebody else, while denigrating the idea's true source, on the other. There was a jarring juxtaposition in what David was saying a few minutes earlier, and what he then said next. Moments after enlisting Kant to level an attack on the speculative metaphysics of Leibniz, David now appeared to be taking an opposite tack. "Carrell is a Kantian," he said dismissively. Why criticize Carrell for that, if David were the one himself siding with Kant only a minute ago? David saw the confusion on his face, so he clarified. Kant, he explained, was right to rein in some of the excesses of traditional metaphysics associated with, say, a Leibniz, Spinoza, or Malebranche, but a wholesale endorsement of the critical philosophy annulled too much of the post-Kantian tradition, which rightly had, since Kant's own time, consistently sought ways to say things about reality that Kant's system had taken itself decisively to have foreclosed. In a word, David proposed that philosophical thought could go beyond Kant, but now it had at least to start with him, something Jack's endorsement of Leibniz failed to do. When David had stopped talking and he still looked baffled as to what any of that had to do with Carrell, David said sullenly, "Carrell's a jock." Coming from David, it was not a compliment. What did that mean, he wondered?

Looking now at Carrell from across the table, he finally saw what David had meant. At the time, he had discounted David's criticism of Carrell as sour grapes. But now it made sense.

Carrell, who had an athletics background, championed a philosophy that was fundamentally martial: getting in people's faces, telling them what you really think, and seeing what they were going to do about it. Someone like David, then, who had always resented that mentality since he was a child, because it was the same mentality that led to him being bullied, recoiled from Carrell's philosophical persona, which to David was a continuation of a high school adolescence he found stunted.

With Carrell, it was true, there was the sense that here was a guy who was always willing to settle an intellectual dispute "off the page," if necessary. Sitting at the table now listening, he imagined himself doing something silly, like standing up on the chair and ripping his shirt off to challenge Carrell to a wrestling match, or interrupting Carrell and telling him to be quiet so they could settle things fair and square with an arm wrestle. He hadn't the slightest desire to do so, but it was fun to play out in his mind what Carrell's reaction would be if he really did something outlandish like that. Of course, it was precisely Carrell's inevitable response that revealed the irony about everything. If he did any of the things he was imagining, Carrell would naturally be mortified, or at least act so, as if what was occurring was totally bizarre and unexpected. He would probably walk away in a tizzy, or maybe call campus security. The irony, of course, was that if he actually did do anything to provoke such a reaction in Carrell, whatever he did would simply be responding directly to the very fantasy everyone could see structured Carrell's public persona. If, after all, Carrell was socially licensed to pretend that the subtext of his philosophical bluntness wasn't physical toughness, when in fact that was exactly what he was doing, then why would Carrell at the same time be allowed to pretend it was shocking if somebody actually acknowledged the the real unspoken norm of all his gestures and words? In thinking about the absurdity of it all, he came to conclude that there was what was in everyone's mind, there was the world, and then there was middle space between them, the place where everyone silently acknowledged what nobody ever said. Maybe this third space, the one outside mind and world that somehow outranked both, was itself reality—the absurd. In any case, he didn't like it, he saw why Karl and Timothy didn't like it either, and he could see how having to go through the acting with Carrell was something James before him had ultimately decided was not worth his time. Life was too short.

In any event, such was the undertone essential to Carrell's style that Karl, who was very intuitive, had picked up on, and was now openly mocking Carrell over, when in email a few weeks ago he had told Carrell to "man up." Karl had shown him the exchange after he been defending Carrell against Karl's criticisms. Karl was absolutely sure Carrell was taunting him, but he was not entirely convinced by Karl's account. But the more Karl had related of the situation that night as they sat outside Karl's cul-de-sac apartment, the harder it was to rationalize what the program was doing to Karl. There had been certain promises made to Karl as part of his acceptance offer, those assurances were now going unfulfilled (Karl had mentioned something about funding) and now Carrell, as the program director, was refusing to give Karl a straight answer about why those expectations were no longer going to be met. The entire experience had been immensely frustrating for Karl, who understandably was beginning to suspect that the

entire reason for it was precisely that, to frustrate him. It wasn't implausible to think that people at Karl's old program were getting those they knew at this one to interfere with Karl's attempt to move on.

Returning his attention to the situation here directly before him at the table, he realized that whereas David had always found Carrell's style overbearing, he for his own part found it unthreatening. In any case, from what he was seeing, first with James and then Karl, and now evidently himself, it seemed Carrell was the type who lost all sense of proportion when trying to dominate somebody he sensed wasn't intimidated. He knew he certainly wasn't afraid of Carrell, just embarrassed for him, seeing now that Carrell apparently had thought he should be afraid.

Just as he was about to say something to Carrell that he assumed would open a long exchange of giving and asking for reasons that would be impossible to finish today before he had to meet his friends at the pub, the fuse went off. Carrell was opting for a tirade instead. "Look," he snarled gruffly, "the fact is that what you've done here in this paper is inconsistent with everything I..."

He drifted back to the lake. He imagined the water lapping against his feet, and pictured the white lilies again. He thought about the ants he had seen, and the beautiful shapes the light made as it flooded through the trees on his walk to the campsite. He pictured the big clouds over the lake, and then visited again the birds in Paris. He thought about how, if he had drowned at the lake and was not able to be sitting here at the table as he was right now, Carrell would be elsewhere rather than at the coffee house, and would not care that he was dead. He didn't resent Carrell for not caring, and he didn't think Carrell was unique in the fact that he wouldn't. There was something inevitably superficial about most everyday relationships and interactions, and that was just the way it was.

It was not that he did not hear the words streaming from Carrell's mouth. He did hear them. He was even listening. It simply was that he had disconnected from them, and, being at peace knowing they did not really matter, he had no interest in letting them sting.

There were reasons, maybe even good ones, for why he felt as he did. To begin with, what Carrell was saying about the paper ultimately had nothing actually to do with the term paper itself. What was driving him over the edge was purely personal, and it was obvious. His advisor's frustration was like his friend's father's bitterness about Manzanar, something someone said, and which was true, but it was only part of the truth, and probably not really the most important part. Beneath Carrell's wanting to grapple with another's ideas *mano a mano* was simply his desire to dominate the other person. The situation here at the coffee house, which was supposed to be about discussing the ideas in the paper, was really about something else. So, seeing what David saw too, he tuned Carrell out, staring directly at his face without saying a word, amusing himself with the thought that this must be how Carrell yells at his wife, or his kids, the employee at the drive thru window, or his neighbor. The outward situation, as it

was institutionally and socially defined, was ridiculous—an old man he barely really even knew was beside himself all because of a paper he'd written.

He wondered how Alison would feel, when she found out he was thinking about leaving. He would have to tell her. He didn't want to leave, now that she was here. But he didn't want to stay for this.

As for this, he was unsure how long it had been going, and when Carrell still showed no sign of relenting, he noticed others at their tables were beginning to look and stare. Probably sensing that he was over the line, and was starting to publicly embarrass himself, Carrell composed himself. His advisor had lost his equilibrium, and he had decided to vent his frustration with the absurdity of everything on him, because he knew his student sensed it too, and would understand. Indulging his advisor's outburst wasn't hard; frankly, it would have been cruelty not to do it. They stood up, shook hands, both saying some formality about how they'd be in touch with one another soon to talk further.

He didn't mention it then, but it would be necessary to tell Carrell about the decision to transfer. The deadline for the Oxford application was soon.

Chapter 11

Night came. The evening's twilight had been especially stunning, a majestic golden glow enshrouding the oaks and byzantine columns and archways, a chorus of cicadas providing nature's hymnal to the setting sun and the moon's ever hastening arrival. He had basked in the sun, and now he would sit under the stars, even if the city lights made them impossible to see.

He was sitting at a table outside the pub with David and their mutual friend Goat. Everyone called him that, because he would insist on it within minutes of meeting anybody—nobody knew why he didn't go by his given name, Matthew, but complying with his bizarre name request was a small inconvenience, given the pleasure keeping his company afforded. A short, stalky man with average features except for a long goatee (whatever the nickname's reason, that was not it), his appearance would be wholly forgettable were it not for his sports jerseys and backwards baseball cap, a middle America aesthetic he enjoyed cultivating immensely, since, aside from making him the exception on a campus among academics who dressed otherwise, it also was in stark opposition to his considerable erudition, an impressive degree of learning typified above all in his mastery of no fewer than five ancient languages, including Coptic. The subject of discussion for today's session was the Synoptics, with a particular focus on Mark, but they hadn't gotten to it. After having a couple of dollar Lone Stars while waiting, David had shown up finally, frazzled from events in seminar, and, clearly no longer in any mood to have today's discussion, he had thrown his Bible on the table and said, "Well, that was the first time I read the New Testament. Won't be doing that again." For a moment, he was sure David must be joking, since it was virtually inconceivable that a religion

scholar could have advanced this far in his studies, much less his life, with this being his first time ever reading Mark, but he realized David was not being facetious. Seeing the incredulity that must have been obvious on his face, David shot him a contemptuous look. He could tell by the expression that David was already plotting his revenge to strike at some point later in the conversation tonight. He sighed. The argument from Saturday was not yet put away.

The ensuing discussion, perhaps surprisingly, had remained lighthearted and even jovial, mostly consisting of wisecracks and harmless anecdotes and other observations about everyday things. Goat and he talked sports. David reminisced about a beloved cabin in Canada. Others they knew had been joining them to the point they had to pull up a second table. It appeared that the attack from David he was expecting would perhaps not come.

Goat stood up and looked at him. "You want one?"

"Yes," he said, fishing three dollars from his pocket. He owed Goat for the last one.

"Thanks." Goat took a bill from David also, and shuffled into the bar, which lay tucked away inside a basement level only accessible through a discreet staircase beneath the biology building. Two doctoral students from the religion program, and a third from history, were talking about the Book of Baruch. "It's narrative among apocalyptic literature is unusual in that..." one of them was saying. He was briefly distracted as Goat returned with the beer. "Here you go. Cheers," he said. They all took sips, and as he was about to turn his attention back to the two tables' conversation, his gaze was drawn to a solitary young man standing next to one of the courtyard's nearby oaks. Without saying a word or offering any greeting, the man, who appeared to be in his late twenties, probably a fellow graduate student, though it was difficult to tell from which department, maybe engineering judging by his beard, sauntered over, and stood over his left shoulder, right between Goat and him.

"Consciousness isn't merely a neurochemical reaction," he said. At first he thought the man might be addressing somebody else at the table, perhaps commenting on something from a conversation earlier that night, but when the rest of the table kept talking about Baruch, he realized that the man must be addressing him. He glanced over at Goat, who was looking straight ahead at David, both of whom seemed to be engrossed in the other conversation. He wracked his mind, struggling to identify who this is and where they must have met, but he couldn't remember, not even a name. Evidently the man knew who he was, because he didn't introduce himself, but proceeded on familiar terms. Standing still, he continued, "I'm sure you've wanted to understand. The problem is that for too long researchers have been investigating within a framework that renders answers impossible." Earlier in the evening, shortly after David had arrived, the group had talked about the origins of consciousness, but it was something that lasted only a few minutes, and it was something that the man would not have heard—he didn't remember seeing him at the bar then. For a moment, he wondered whether the man had been present at some other conversation at which the topic had come up, maybe in a seminar or a lecture or a party, but still he couldn't recall his face. By this point

the man had been talking long enough that it was too late to ask his name, because the man, whoever he was, would assume that he remembered who he is.

He tried focusing less on the fact that he couldn't place the man, and more on what he was saying. "Descartes, as you know, had speculated it's the pineal gland that houses the key to the union between mind and body. For a long time, people mocked the idea, dismissing it as baseless speculation on his part, but he was right. It's a mystery as to how he could have known, since at the time, the science was not sufficiently advanced to have suggested the hypothesis to him. He must have deduced it on metaphysical considerations alone, or maybe even mystical ones," the man said.

"Yes, right. There's that story I heard about Descartes claiming to have met an angel once. He said something about it in a letter somewhere, I think," he said to the man.

"Correct. He was given a revelation of the inner workings of nature," the man said, looking directly at him with a subtle smile and twinkle in his eye. Though he wasn't directly party to the conversation, Goat shifted uncomfortably in his chair, coughed nervously as if to clear his throat, and then chugged down the rest of his Lone Star. He crushed the plastic cup, and tossed it into the nearby basket: "And it's good!" he hooted. Goat and he locked eyes for a moment as the visitor continued.

"But enough about Descartes. The point is that modern science still did not have the capability of unraveling the mystery of consciousness. Consciousness is not a purely materialistic process, so it's impossible to understand by means of physics, or biology, or chemistry alone." He thought this might be a natural place at which to ask the man what he studied, since presumably he worked in one of the science labs on campus. "Which department are you?" he asked the man.

"I'm not with the university," the man replied. He felt like asking why, then, somebody who wasn't a student or teacher at the university would be at campus pub, why he would want to talk about consciousness of all things, why he would come to this table rather than any of the others, and from where they knew each other, if not from here at school. But before he had a chance to get a sentence out, the young man was saying more.

"The key lies in biophysics. The field is young but promising, you'll see."

"How so?" he asked.

"It understands that there is no way to explain the interactions between the brain and the mind, nature and consciousness, with the models we have been using previously," he said.

He was preparing to say something about scientific reductionism and the relation between physics and biology, but before he could, the young man stared straight at him, and with a complete assurance that he would understand his words, said, "But you know what I'm

trying to say. You think about it a lot, and have been for years. Listen to me: biophysics. Only it can comprehend the wraith.”

“The wraith?” he asked.

The young man smiled knowingly, and without saying another word, nodded and walked away. He waited a few minutes to see whether the man was coming back, since perhaps he had gone into the bar to grab a beer or use the restroom. When it was clear he had vanished, he turned to the rest of the table.

“Hey, guys, who was that?” he asked everyone.

They all paused, and looked confused. “Who?”

He was confused. “Uh, the guy that just left.”

“What guy?”

He was now even further confused. He gestured in the same direction to which the man had disappeared. “The one that was standing right next to me for the last five or ten minutes talking about consciousness.”

Nobody knew of whom he was talking. He had assumed they’d been listening to some of what the man had said. At the very least, they would have seen him standing at the table. A passage from Simone Weil, which he had not recalled in years, suddenly stirred within him. And though he did not say it aloud, he quietly mouthed the words, “Chance—for I always prefer saying chance rather than Providence—made of him a messenger to me.”

He appealed to Goat. “I thought he knew somebody here. You don’t know who he was?” he asked.

With a face white as a sheet, Goat said uneasily, “No, I thought you knew who he was.”

“Did you catch his name?” he asked Goat, double-checking to make sure he hadn’t somehow missed it.

“No, he never said anything.”

Neither said another word, because they both knew they didn’t have to. The visitor had felt benign. But his discreet apparition, which had taken the form of an inexplicable and unbidden intrusion, was eerie. They took comfort in the knowledge that there is no such thing as ghosts.

Chapter 12

It was nearly nine, which was early, but he was tired. He thought about walking home. Before he could stand to leave, his phone vibrated. It was a local friend of his, a law student,

whom he originally had met at one of the coffee shops nearby his apartment. They would study together sometimes, and now they were becoming drinking buddies too. "Drink?" it said. He must be finishing at the coffee shop, meaning he would be near the bar. "Sounds good," he said. "Cool, I'll be there at ten." Without saying, they knew which spot they had in mind, the same place as last Saturday and Tuesday. He thought about the magnolia tree.

Now that plans meant not going straight home, he could not use being tired as an excuse to leave. He generally avoided lying, especially about small things, since he felt there was something particularly sinister in choosing to lie over a triviality whose truth was relatively painless, so he decided to tell everyone that he was leaving for elsewhere. Maybe someone would want to join him. He told them.

"Sorry, can't go. I should be heading out anyway. Jessica probably already wants me home," Goat said. Goat was the only one married, and the fact that he was contributed to his middle American persona. "I swear, sometimes I think that's the only reason you ever got married, Goat, just to be able to constantly remind everyone that you are," David quipped. The others at the table did not know him well, so naturally they were uninterested in accepting the offer. That left David as the only remaining potential taker. "I parked off campus," he continued, switching his attention from Goat to him, "but we could walk over to my car and drive. I don't want to leave it here, if I'm going to the bar." So David was going. He was actually pleased, since he thought that having the opportunity to spend time alone together might help clear the air, and dispel whatever lingering hostility there was from Saturday. "Okay, great. Ready when you are," he said. Everyone stood to say their goodbyes.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the pub door swing open, clanging against a railing. Everyone was startled. They looked over. It was Mick. He had been drinking heavily, and was wobbling as he made his way to the tables. His eyes were nearly shut, and his jaw was dangling open—it appeared he may even start drooling. He stumbled over, and plopped on a chair, which, tilting into a crack it caught on the courtyard, almost sent him spilling off the chair onto the ground. He braced himself with his arm, palm to the ground, just in time. Embarrassed to see him like this, everyone but David and Goat left hastily.

When the others were out of earshot, Goat leaned in and said, "Mick, are you okay, buddy? What are you doing? This is really bad."

Mick didn't seem to hear.

"Mick, it's David. Do you know where you are?" David seemed amused by the spectacle, though he was going to do what he could to help.

"Mick," he said, placing his hand on Mick's shoulder, "You need to go home now. David was just about to leave here. He can drive you home." Goat looked at David expectantly.

“Yes, that’s right you ol’ sad sack, I can take you home.” Though he was detached from Mick’s plight, David perceived the situation for what it was, seeing that this excess wasn’t driven by enthusiasm, like Saturday’s after the lake, but rather by despair.

“Shut up you, guys. It’s not funny,” Mick slurred.

“Nobody’s laughing at you, Mick,” Goat said.

“That’s not true. I am. But it’s okay, it’s fine, Mick. We’ll get you home,” David said.

Before they could help him to his feet, Mick stood up, and careened over to the main oak in the courtyard. He leaned his forearm against the trunk, his head in his hand. They looked away when they realized he was urinating.

“Oh, God,” Goat said. David was laughing hysterically. “Attaboy, Mick!”

“It’s not funny, David. The police could arrest him. What if his teachers see?” Goat said.

Mick finished, walked over, and slumped down at the table. “Take him and get him out of here, guys,” Goat said. They all helped him to his feet, and told him they were taking him to the car, so he could go home.

The silver Oldsmobile was waiting a block from campus, just down the street from Karl’s cul-de-sac. David brushed off some leaves that had fallen on the hood. For a moment, he silently considered whether they should stop by Karl’s to surprise him, and ask if he wanted to come with them. “Karl won’t want to go,” David said, obviously having also considered the possibility himself. They got in, rolled their windows down, and David lit a cigarette. The car’s wheels had been turned toward the curb, so when David pulled away, he drove up on the curb. “Bah,” he said, as the car thumped down back onto the street. Mick was on the verge of vomiting, as he laid sprawled out delirious in the back seat. They drove a few blocks to Mick’s, where a roommate, Rose, was waiting to help him in. “Thanks,” she said, as she helped Mick out of the backseat. “Have a good night, mate,” David chuckled as the door shut.

As they sat parked in front, David lit a cigarette. He did too. “What was that all about, do you think?”

“Who knows. I’ll find out later,” David said. He pulled out, and they were silent for a minute, as he drove on.

“How’s your dissertation going?” he asked.

“Terrible. It’s garbage, but my advisor told me not to worry. At this point it’s just about finishing,” David explained.

“I’m sure it’s good,” he said. He was being sincere. If his writing was even halfway adequate, he found it hard to believe the dissertation could be that bad, given how sharp David

was. David was apparently being modest. Sometimes he would be self-deprecatory to invite praise, but not this time.

“Well, I don’t need anyone’s support with it. I’m fine,” he said icily. He thought about why David would resent anything he had just said about the dissertation, and then it occurred to him that mentioning it must have led David to infer he meant to be bringing up Saturday’s events, where everyone had been talking about Buber. He hadn’t intended his comment about the dissertation to invite a larger conversation about Saturday. Clearly David didn’t want to talk about it, and neither did he, but if he mentioned that now, it would appear he was saying so to agree with David only after his attempt to broach the subject had been rebuffed. He looked out the window, and wondered how much of everyone else’s lives were besought with these little confusions and miscommunications that piled up. Before they were forced to settle on what next to talk about instead, they reached the bar, and parked the car.

Rusty was working the door. “Hi, guys,” he said, as they came up the stairs. He shook their hands and was glad to see them, despite a hint of surprise on his face from seeing them walking in together. He realized that Rusty, who had been working the door on Saturday, probably saw David and the others leave that night at closing time. Whatever they had said about him and the events from earlier in the night would not have been flattering. He thought about how strange a job it would be, to sit and observe everyone’s lives, like a fly on the wall, watching the fallout, and everyone’s clumsy ways of trying to work through whatever it was that resulted. Having unfettered access to what people were concealing from others gave Rusty something like an omniscient perspective. And while he was not the type who would ever ask Rusty about what others had said about him, he tried to imagine what Rusty was making of the situation.

When they walked inside, there were a few people seated at the counter, and they could hear voices on the balcony upstairs, but the booths were all empty. “Booth?” he asked. “No, bar,” David said.

Billy was working. “The usual?”

“Yes, please,” he said.

Billy went to the fridge, grabbed two Lone Stars, popped the caps off, poured two whiskeys, and set the drinks down on the counter. “Four dollars,” he said. He saw David begin reaching for his wallet. “David, don’t worry about it. I got it.” He already had the bills out, but David insisted. “It’s cheap. I can take care of it,” David said. He thought about clarifying that he hadn’t been insinuating David couldn’t afford it, but like before with the confusion over the dissertation in the car, he decided to let it be.

At that moment, he realized the revenge he thought he had seen would be coming at the graduate pub, and which he then thought wasn’t going to materialize, after all, was coming now. David had been storing it up, saving it for later, probably because he didn’t want the

others to see it. Now that they weren't on campus, he said, "I don't expect you to apologize for how you behaved on Saturday, frankly I don't need you to do that, but I did want to say that it upset me, it upset others, and you should be aware that your actions have consequences. I'm pretty thick-skinned, but not everybody else is." He thought about where he would begin, if he were inclined to point out all that was wrong about that statement. He would observe that if he should apologize, so should David; he would observe that if David really wasn't expecting an apology there was no reason to bring up the fact he wasn't looking for one; he would observe that if David were upset, so was he; he would observe that he didn't deny his actions have consequences, so it was patronizing and arrogant to suggest he had to be reminded that they did; he would observe that it was disingenuous to speak for others when they weren't here to speak for themselves; and, above all, he would observe that if David were anything, it certainly wasn't thick-skinned, a fact manifest by the way he was currently ambushing him over something that by now wasn't any longer worth discussing. Instead, like at the coffee house with Carrell, he let the other play out the fantasy. David wanted him to say everything he just thought to himself, so that he could entangle them both in a knot impossible to untie, but because he didn't want to involve himself in it, he kept silent.

When David perceived that he wasn't taking the bait, he chuckled. "You think you're so much smarter than everyone," David said. Another provocation. He wouldn't note that the same could be said of David, and so he shouldn't project, or that David presumed to know so much about his heart, when David was the same one that constantly told everyone that it was wrong to judge others.

Realizing that this second minor provocation was no more effective than the first, David paused to recalibrate. "Cigarette?" he suggested.

If he said no, he knew David would take that as a minor victory, a sign that, although he had been able not to say anything escalating the situation, he had succumbed to the temptation of reflexive noncompliance the moment he had seen the chance. It didn't matter, of course, that there was simply the possibility that he didn't want to smoke, David would refuse to consider it, so rather than feed in to his interpretation, he surprised David. "Sure, sounds good." He walked to the cigarette machine by the pool table, bought a pack of cigarettes, glanced over at the photo booth in the corner, and walked back to the counter. "Downstairs or upstairs?" he asked David. If David wanted to pretend that he was being difficult, then he would defer to David in everything, even if it became comical, since that, he supposed, would serve its own purpose. The entire situation was ridiculous, after all, and he knew David knew it too.

"Ah, I see, letting me make all the decisions. Very nice of you," David snickered. David wanted him to reply that it had been his intention to be obvious, so of course David saw, but again, he bit his tongue, and stepped over the trap. "I don't know what you'd do without me, David. You wouldn't be able to amuse yourself," he said instead.

“Kinda like how I don’t know what you’d do without God,” David shot back. “You’re too smart for that,” he added.

He felt good that he’d worked through the preliminaries, by avoiding the warm-up provocations, so that they could get on with the main issue. Here they were. “Downstairs?” he asked, as they got to the stairs. “Yeah,” David said. He opened the patio door, strode out, and grabbed a stool at the railing near the sidewalk where he liked to sun himself in the afternoons. He looked up. The stars were invisible, but the moon was full, without a cloud in the sky.

Noticing the moon too, David said, “Ah, I long for the times when we thought the moon was near, as it appears, and that the sun moved over the face of the earth. The truth is ugly though,” he said. Rather than take David’s allusion to Nietzsche as his point of reference, in reply, he decided he would have David answer Kierkegaard.

“You’ve read Kierkegaard, David.”

“Yes, of course. Brilliant, but ultimately deluded,” he stated.

“You psychologize everything,” he stated, the reference to their weekend argument about therapy being deliberate.

“What else is there?” David retorted.

“Well, as you know, were that all there is, there would be no point in arguing about anything, much less everything, since all there would be are interpretations. But since all you like to do is argue constantly about everything, I have to conclude you’re being dishonest with yourself, and, contrary to what you always say, you do think there’s more to existence than interpretations. Then again, maybe you’re angry, because you can’t stop from arguing even though you recognize it’s pointless doing so, if you’re really right.”

“I don’t have any problem accepting things are interpretation. Nietzsche was absolutely right when he said it’s all interpretation. Maybe everything’s an illusion. So be it,” he said.

He could run through the logic from last Tuesday when, here alone at the bar, he had considered whether everything is an illusion, and how, if so, that would lead to a contradiction. He remembered how he had come to the conclusion that it was an argument he had had too many times already, one he was tired of having, and one that in a way didn’t make sense to him anymore, since it didn’t change anybody’s mind. He felt he was right about that; it was an empty argument. So rather than arguing to David about how nihilism can’t be true if everything is indeed an illusion, he said nothing.

There was something about his silence that offended David. “You always stop arguing when you think it will make the point for you, that somehow you’re showing everyone you’re right, by no longer trying to convince them that you are. That’s dishonest, I think,” David said.

“I think you provoke people endlessly, because that’s all that gives you temporary relief from whatever’s really bothering you,” he said.

“Yes, well, that’s what I’ve been trying to figure out at therapy. You avoid the question by pretending you have all the answers,” he stated. “God is the lazy way out,” he added, as if what he had meant wasn’t already clear.

“Shouldn’t you say the coward’s way out? Nietzsche is all about strength.”

“There is such a thing as intellectual courage, obviously. Believing the truth can require bravery. But, anyway, whether you want to call it cowardice or laziness, the point is that belief in God is what it is,” said David.

“Well, I just find it interesting that you of all people are the one making the martial metaphors, insinuating that it’s strength and courage that decide who does or doesn’t believe the truth, when you’re the one who so often criticizes people like Carrell for being a jock about ideas.” For a moment, David didn’t know what to say. David knew he knew David had complete disdain for Carrell for that reason, and David realized that he was adopting a stance toward the issue that was reminiscent of the very mentality he’d typically mock as infantile. He had noticed this before, how as much as atheists are united in their dislike for God or the belief in God, they always had such contempt for each other at the same time, and were always bickering about everything else. The best way to show the instability in an atheist’s own position was to point out its parallel to somebody else whose thinking and personality he couldn’t stand.

“Well, I don’t want to get into him,” David said. “If I ever said he was a jock, what I meant is that he wants disciples. Especially in his students.”

He had a question he would like to ask Carrell, whom he assumed was an atheist too. So he asked David. “Why do you harp on God so much, if you think he doesn’t exist?”

“I’m not angry at God. I’m angry at—well, I wouldn’t say angry—I don’t respect people who live a lie thinking there’s a God,” he said.

“Yes, but you’re the one who said that things are all an illusion. If believing in God is one illusion among others, why is that the one that bothers you so much? You’re going to tell me that’s a coincidence?” he said.

“It’s an illusion that those who believe shove in other people’s faces, and it’s obnoxious. And the delusion only worsens, too, as people get older.” The implication was that, given that he was already a believer now, he’d be unimaginably intolerable when he was older.

He thought David was right that many people probably do become increasingly fervent in their faith as they age. But he didn’t see the objection to it. “I suppose many people who reject God when they’re young, only get more rabid in their hatred of God as they got older. Same thing. There’s only two directions, and everyone chooses one.”

“Uh, please,” David sighed. “You’re too smart for that. Everything’s always so binary with you.”

“Maybe the truth is simple,” he said.

“Christ, you’re an idiot sometimes,” David laughed.

It took all his strength not to criticize David for the blasphemy. Once again, it was David taunting him. He felt like they were going in circles, and that the conversation was futile. The scorecard was fairly easy to keep. David thought he was weak for believing in God; he thought David was weak for not believing. David thought he was delusional for thinking he saw something that was only a phantom; he thought David was delusional for blinding himself to what he’d otherwise see if he hadn’t. David thought he sought happiness in a comforting lie; he thought David preferred his misery if it meant not having to accept the truth made demands of him that he was unwilling to accept.

Although he knew it was entering in fragmented form, he could recall the majority of the passage from memory that seemed to him relevant, “It was as if an error slipped into an author’s writing and the error became conscious of itself as an error ... and now this error wants to mutiny against the author, out of hatred toward him, forbidding him to correct it and in maniacal defiance saying to him: No, I refuse to be erased; I will stand as a witness against you, a witness that you are a second-rate author.” Disbelief was defiance, he thought.

As if reading his mind, David said, “You want to be appeased. That’s your mistake.”

“The trouble is that you don’t. You want to believe the truth can’t be beautiful. You say that’s naïve, because you’re scared of what it would mean for you if it were true. So you writhe in your self-imposed disaffection.”

“Oh, Jesus. Give me a break,” he said.

As he looked at David, he could see that David thought resorting to breezy blasphemy had power in it, like it somehow proved the name could not signify anything it was said to mean, because if it did, there would be no way a man, any man, could just casually defy God by taking the name in vain. A truly powerful God would not allow his creatures to do that, but his creatures can, *ergo* there must not be any such God. Thinking there was proved to be superstition. He saw that for David, blasphemy was like performing an exorcism, but instead of chasing away evil, it kept at arm’s length the idea there was a God who cared. He knew that if he tried mentioning to David how he had once read in a biography of Dostoevsky how the latter’s friends loved mocking Christ viciously in order to drive him to tears, he would misunderstand his statement. David would construe his comment as intending to equate himself with Dostoevsky. He would be accused of arrogance and laughed at, and the point he had hoped to make by mentioning it would go unaddressed. There is nothing new under the sun—that is what he wished to say by it. But rather than explain why he, just like others before him, derive such immense delight in mocking Christ, David would choose to turn the subject to

anything else, and, in this case, that would mean channeling his scorn directly on him for what he said, without addressing it squarely. He said nothing.

Suddenly, his mind produced the scene of the time when he was ten years old, and his father was working on the ladder fixing an issue with the garage roof. He had been standing at the foot of the ladder watching the work. He could no longer remember what exactly it was, but something had gone wrong, maybe his father had dropped a tool or something like that, so he said under his breath loudly enough for his father to hear, "Jesus." His father snapped around immediately, and through a clenched jaw he had never seen before, said, "What did you just say? Don't ever say that again." He had never seen his father so stern, and he felt fear and shame for what he had done to cause it, though he wasn't sure what exactly that had been. He didn't understand what he had said. The only reason he said it was because he had heard his grandfather say it before when he was frustrated. He knew his father was a good man, and he trusted him, so he knew that there must be a good reason for his father's being upset. But he also had thought his grandfather was a good man, too, so he was confused why, then, his grandfather would have said what he had, if his father thought it such a bad thing to say. He tried understanding what possibly could be explaining the disagreement between them, but eventually he dropped it, when he couldn't make sense of it. Only now, years later on this muggy Texas night, had he thought about that moment.

A voice other than David's interrupted his reverie. "Hey, buddy." It was his friend, the law student, walking up the stairs. Rusty waved him through. Jackson Nowak was a gregarious man of twenty-six, ambitious and slightly arrogant, but generally good-natured and well-intentioned. He liked disappointing people's stereotypes of him, which is why he maintained his hair in an overly-gelled, slicked-back style. Even though he knew in the real world it proved a sham, Jackson liked to pretend that the legal profession was noble, that ethics came first, and that he was destined to be wealthy and successful the honest way. The certitude he would become so, and with the utmost integrity, was partly what lent to the inevitable impression he was a little too self-confident, but he personally could look past Jackson's egoism, when it was to a large extent rooted in a sincere belief that he was capable of not having to compromise his integrity in the way others thought necessary.

A minute after barging through the front door, Jackson emerged on the patio, three shots in hand. "It's shot time, guys," he said.

"Thanks, man," he said.

"No thanks, I should be going. It's a Tuesday, so tonight's not the night for this," David said. He left the porch without saying a word, walked out the front door, and waved faintly to them down the stairs without looking. The headlights to the Oldsmobile came on, and the car pattered down to the light, where it made a left, and disappeared from view behind the repair shop.

“What was that guy’s problem? What a dick,” Jackson laughed. He put on a serious face. “Sorry, he’s your friend?” he asked.

“Yeah, he’s someone I know from school.” He was about to say more, but Jackson’s comment gave him a bit of distance from the situation. It was like a dark cloud dispersing, and he decided to let it go.

They spent a couple hours chatting pleasantly about law school and some girl Jackson was interested in. When it reached midnight, he felt like it was time to go home. Jackson knew it was a short walk for him to the apartment, but because it looked like there was still something on his mind that he wanted to say, Jackson offered to drive him home the short distance. When they got there, he idled the car outside the entryway to the main courtyard. As he was about to close the passenger door, he heard Jackson lean over the center console. With a knowing face, Jackson said, “Hey man, look at the moon.” He looked up at it, and then back to Jackson. Jackson was quiet for a few seconds. “The moon is not for you, it just is,” he said. He laughed to himself, said goodbye, and drove off.

He understood Jackson’s point, which he recognized had some truth to it. Ultimately, though, he disagreed, even if he couldn’t say how exactly. He thought that if she were here, she would know. But there was no way to reach her.

Chapter 13

In the morning, he went out for a cigarette in the courtyard. There was no shade at the table, but the sun felt good, the warmth of which would help him emerge from the grogginess. He sat down and watched the birds hopping in the grass. The clovers were still there, having withstood a storm that evidently must have blown in during the night when he was sleeping.

He thought about everything that had changed in just a week. Or, if not changing, at least coming more into focus, he decided. Karl, who was supposed to show up at Mick’s birthday party at the bar, had not shown up, and his sudden reclusiveness portended a permanent departure, both from the program and the city. Timothy, who on Saturday night appeared to be in the best shape he had been in recent memory, hadn’t been seen at the apartment since, which suggested he was either back at the hospital going through the motions, or that he had gone off the deep end, and taken a trip to conceivably anywhere. As for Mick, things had inexplicably taken a turn for the worse, when last night he looked utterly disconsolate after having been in such good spirits over the weekend. Jack, who had no plans to leave like Karl or Timothy, would be holding on to his old habits, even if they were starting to catch up with him, if his persistent cough were any indication. Tony, who at this stage was probably the most stable of everyone, was increasingly having less in common with them, and it would not be surprising if he went home to Miami to truly start anew. Paul was descending into an even worse alcoholism, and it likely wouldn’t be long before Clara lost patience and left him

because of it. Where she would go when everyone else started to leave was unclear. David, who was always sensitive to the situation around him, must have sensed that what had been everyone's routine for the last couple of years was now rapidly disintegrating, and that it was time to finish his thesis and leave for Canada. And then there was Cody, who, eagerly awaiting his acceptances from doctoral programs, was displaying an obvious distaste for everything there, and which was becoming clearer each time he showed up. And so, sensing that this would be the last summer everyone would be together, David and Jack were throwing a party at their apartment on Saturday night, the pretext being Jack's fortieth birthday. Everyone mentioned, and dozens of other students and locals they all knew, would be there.

As he lit another cigarette, he watched the squirrels scamper through the branches of the courtyard's elm tree. Laplacian determinism could not account for something so simple, he thought. Even the squirrels have an integrity all their own, a style whose being could not be simply reduced to nothing by equating it with anything, and thereby everything, else. In the name of science, metaphysical reductionism, he was more convinced than ever, merely eliminated nature, rather than explained it. In principle, he could concede somebody like David having a genuine hesitation as to whether a man had a soul, or whether instead we were simply animals, but he had no comprehension of how others like Cody or Tony could seriously maintain that we were animals, and not only that, not really animals, since animals themselves, like these squirrels playing here in the tree, were an illusion too, just complicated arrangements of an underlying biological and physical complexity that left no room for things such as humans, squirrels, and trees. It was just atoms and the void to them. A squirrel with a nut wandered up to the table. It went about its business unconcerned with him. He laughed to himself and shook his head.

He stood up to head back inside, realizing the sort of train of thought he'd just completed no longer held the sway over him it once did. For so long, he had been able to talk endlessly about such matters, with anyone at any time, very often late into the early morning hours, whether at people's apartments or houses, in the car on long drives, at bars, or in seminar rooms, or discussion and reading groups. It was just one long ever-expanding, never-ending conversation about everything that now felt like nothing. The idea of heading over to the coffee house where Jackson and the philosophy students would be at this hour was inconceivable, the prospect of listening to one of them arguing with some other about whether a squirrel possessed more than a material cause, but formal and final ones also, was revolting to him. If he was being honest, he simply didn't care anymore whether Aristotle, or Newton, or Kuhn was right about squirrels. It didn't make sense to him how the question, even assuming there was any way of answering it decisively, had anything to do with what mattered. He was tired of life being one long argument, or series of them.

His memory dredged up an encounter from last fall. He, Goat, David, and another doctoral student, a man in his late forties who was already something of a burgeoning icon in

the world of psychonautics, were all sitting on the front porch of a somewhat yuppie bar. David and the other went inside for a pitcher, and he went to light a cigarette.

“You should quit those, you know,” Goat said.

“Yeah, I know,” he said, assuming an acknowledgment would suffice to halt the conversation.

Goat, however, pressed on with his admonishment. “When you smoke, people see why, they know it’s because you’re tormented. Only unhappy people smoke,” he said. For a fleeting moment, he thought about pointing out that only sad people drink the way they all do, including Goat himself, but he was silent. Goat was right about the cigarettes, he knew.

Seeing his comment had hit the mark, Goat concluded with a word of encouragement. Gesturing inside to where David and his psychonaut friend had just entered, he said, “Don’t become like those two.” He paused, adjusted his hat, and opened the Bible to the reading selection which that day had been the Epistle of James. “We’re not like them,” he concluded, looking up at him from the book.

As the image of the scene from memory faded but the mood it evoked did not, his attention returned to the room around him. He looked over at the shelf, grabbed a book off it, walked out the door, and stepped into the courtyard. For a moment, he almost decided to head over to the coffee house, after all, but he overrode the force of habit with an act of will in the name of something he couldn’t quite put into words. Heading right rather than left, he walked up the street and in short order was at the park. The fountain was flowing, and he took a seat at a bench by the magnolia, the Millrose Tower across the street casting its shadow onto the secluded plaza. He could not explain why, but he felt like Alison should be here too, or that she would be soon. He waited a while, and then sighed and stood. Over at the bar, which had just opened, Rusty was putting out a chair, as he was evidently working the afternoon shift today. He must have felt somebody watching him, because he looked up, and stared into the park, and then waved. Seeing Rusty, he decided he may as well stop in.

“Hey, Rusty,” he said at the top of the stairs.

“Hey, buddy, great to see you,” Rusty said. The smile was big and genuine. They shook hands, and they paused, seeing whether the other would say anything first, but when neither of them did, they broke out laughing together. There was no reason to say anything, because there was too much to say if they tried, and anyway they both already knew what there was to say, so there was no reason to bother saying it. He admired that about Rusty, that Rusty was comfortable not having to say something always, that he understood a silence could communicate as much as anything, sometimes even more than words.

His mind drifted to an old friend of his still back in California, Justin Reinman, who was just that way. They could go hours without saying a word to one another, because they knew there was nothing to say. It has been a few years since they had spoken, but it felt like a pause,

a long silence that he knew his friend also knew would be overcome whenever they decided to pick up the conversation again. He realized he probably didn't think enough about Justin, because it reminded him of their mutual friend, the same friend who'd told him about the world of blackmail and corporate espionage. When their friend committed suicide not too long ago, there were now no more stories about Portland restaurants or anything else. Avoiding Justin, he realized, was a way of not having to remember their friend's death. He thought that Justin probably understood that, or that he would have found a reason to justify his silence, anyway. He realized that was what made him a true friend, as opposed to the people here now in his life. No matter what he did, with them, it was never enough, and there was always something wrong, something they were upset with him for having done or not having done. But with Justin, it was the opposite. He couldn't think of a single time they'd ever so much as shouted at one another.

He took a seat at the bar, and was about to take out his phone and try calling his friend in California, when Billy came over. "The usual?"

"No, thanks. Lemonade, please."

"Sure thing," Billy said. He poured him a glass, and set it down. "On the house."

He stood up and walked out to his spot on the patio for a cigarette. He lit it, and stuck his head out over the railing into the sunshine. "Yeah, boy, that's nice, isn't it?" Rusty said. The door behind him on the patio opened, there were some footsteps, and the sound of somebody pulling up a stool next to his.

"Gentlemen," the young man said. "Think I might join you myself. Sunning like a couple of cats looks pretty good," he added. Lofton, he did not know his last name, was a regular at the bar, somebody with whom he would chat during afternoons like these. He had very light blond hair, just like Timothy's, only it was cut short. Most of the time, he had on a smile like a Smurf, which only drew attention to his pale blue eyes, and which were incredibly kind, but also deeply sad looking. Lofton worked as a waiter at a nearby restaurant. After using his paycheck to pay the rent, he would use his tips to come here, nursing a severe drinking problem suggesting a melancholy whose cause was too delicate for anyone to ask about. Nothing was certain, but the sadness had the aura of the death of a loved one. He would walk everywhere, including here to the bar, having lost his license after a recent DUI. It was only recently that the two had learned they were neighbors, Lofton's own complex, The Oaks, lying just a stone's throw from his, the two apartments sharing a fence. They had been making plans to meet up somewhere rather than here, but it never happened, since, on occasions like this one today, they found themselves together on the patio, with nowhere else to be. He realized that, like Justin and Rusty, Lofton was also somebody who said relatively little, because he had too much to say. For a few minutes, the three of them just sat in silence, smiling in the sun, enjoying each other's presence.

"Excuse me guys, I'll be right back," he said to them.

He went in, walked over to the cigarette machine to buy some more, then walked down the checker board hallway to the bathroom. On the way back to the patio, he stopped at the bar for another lemonade, then stepped back outside. As he descended the stairs and was about to round the corner, he could hear voices besides Lofton's. "There he is," Lofton said pointing to him. Alison was there smiling, sitting casually in a white blouse and brown skirt. For a split second he worried he might drop his glass from surprise. "Oh, uh, hi," he stammered. He didn't want to appear rude, but he was afraid to be overly familiar. Aside from the usual nervousness that might be expected, there was the further fact that she was with the twins, the two of them sitting on opposite shoulders. "Hi," he said introducing himself to them. Neither of them was eager to talk, and he could tell they were suspicious since Alison clearly lit up when she saw him, but with Lofton being there, they could not do much about it. They were stuck.

"Do you know Lofton?" he asked the twins.

"Yeah. We've seen him here," Sandra said as if distractedly. Lofton seemed not to notice, or perhaps not to care. "Well, since it's turning out to be something of a gathering, how about we all go get some shots?" Lofton suggested. The twins noticeably perked up. "I'll need someone to help," he continued. Alison stood up intending to go. She waited for Lofton to reach the stairs, and then she made her way too, her hand almost brushing up against his leg, as he watched her try catching up to Lofton, who was a few feet ahead of her, waiting on the stairs. He could feel Sandra watching them like a hawk.

It was silent for a minute on the patio. The twins were on their phones, and occasionally they would look up to say something to one another about their respective text conversations. Sandra put her phone next to her Strongbow on the railing, put her hand under her chin, her elbow on the counter, and turned to him. "So, who are you?"

He had already told her his name, so he said, "I live in the neighborhood."

"Yeah, that makes sense, since you're here in the afternoon. What do you do?"

"I'm a graduate student," he said, taking care not to refer to himself as a philosopher. She didn't ask what he studied.

"You know Alison?" Stephanie asked. The question was searching, but not quite as pointed as Sandra's way of questioning. He judged that Stephanie must be the happy twin.

"Yes. Well, not really. We've met," he said. "Actually, we met here last week," he added.

"Cool," she said, though it was clear she was still deciding what to think of him and the situation.

"What do you do?" he asked. He was asking both of them, but Sandra pretended he was only asking Stephanie.

“Well, I’m not sure how it will go, but right now I’m thinking of becoming an airline attendant,” Stephanie said.

“Oh, that would be really cool,” he said. “Don’t you get discounts?” he asked.

“Yeah, attendants get free personal travel,” she said. He was contemplating asking where should we be travelling, but he could tell that Sandra thought he was the type who would only ask such a thing because he hadn’t travelled himself much, so rather than have to list all the places to which he’d travelled to correct her misimpression of him, he decided to drop the subject.

“Justice, Alison’s boyfriend, is in a band, so she likes travelling. We’ll probably be going on a lot of trips together,” Sandra said, looking up from her phone. She turned from him and looked to Stephanie, “When she’s out with the drinks, tell Alison that Justice just told me he’ll be here soon.” She stood up and walked inside.

Chapter 14

“Oh, no, I’m so sorry,” she gasped. Stephanie had spilled a glass of water on the book. He quickly pulled it from the spill, where she started dabbing it with her paper napkin. She’d knocked the glass over with her elbow reaching for one of the shots that Lofton was carrying. “Don’t worry about it,” he said reassuringly. By the looks of it, the damage was minimal, and in any case, as much as he loved books, he wasn’t particularly conscientious about their physical upkeep. The book in question’s cover was torn, and it had its fair share of coffee stains.

“*The Idiot*,” she remarked, reading the cover. Stephanie looked up, waiting for him to say more. Before he could, Alison started to interject excitedly, “Yeah, Dostoevsky...”

Lofton, who had begun his own sentence nearly simultaneously as hers, pressed into his sentence without trailing off or pausing, “Oh! I love that book. We read *Crime and Punishment* in high school,” he said. Alison looked at him and smiled. “It happened again,” he said, referring to the fact about how everyone seemed to talk over her without noticing.

“What happened?” Sandra asked puzzled. He could tell Alison was about to explain, but then decided not to.

“Well, before we get too far into books, there’s the shots,” Lofton said. He lined them up. “Lemon drops,” Alison said, peering over Lofton’s shoulder as she looked at him.

“I already had a lemonade, too,” he said.

“Can’t have too much lemon,” Stephanie laughed.

They all lined up against the rail, the shot in their hands, counted to three, and swigged down the Lemon Drops. “Ahhh, just like candy,” Lofton said.

He was about to turn to Stephanie and say something about the book, when Sandra said to her, "Seen any good movies lately?"

Stephanie's face lit up. "Bert and I have been watching a lot of movies. But for some reason I can't think of any right now," she laughed.

He generally didn't watch movies, but he did have a few he absolutely loved. He thought about mentioning Terrence Malick, but decided instead to mention the Nicolas Winding Refn film that came to mind. "Do any of you like Refn?" He could tell by the looks on their faces that everyone except Lofton didn't know who was referencing. "Yeah, you ever seen *Bronson*?" Lofton asked.

"Yeah, really good, I thought. But you know, I think *Valhalla Rising* is good too," he said.

"Oh man, yeah. Great movie. People for some reason don't like it that much, but I don't get it," Lofton said.

Enthused that Lofton knew Refn, he mentioned the film he had in mind from the start. "Ever seen *Drive*?"

"Hah! 'Ever seen *Drive*?' Of course. Wanna watch it?"

"So you like it?" he asked.

"Yeah, man, I've watched that movie a thousand times. I was planning to watch it again soon, anyway. We should watch it tonight." Lofton paused for a moment and looked at Alison and the twins. "You're all invited of course," he said.

"Oh, thanks, but Bert and I were going to stay in tonight," Stephanie explained.

"Yeah, I'm going to pass too. Sounds fun, but I should probably get going," Sandra said.

Stephanie startled. "Wait, but I thought Justice was on his way?"

"No, he just texted me to say something's come up, so he won't be coming," she explained.

He looked over at Alison, whose hint of a smile on her face suggested she may have had something to do with Justice's not coming by. She looked at Lofton. "I'll go," she said. "Never seen it."

"Well, then, great. How about you two come over at, say, seven thirty?" He assumed they were a couple, which was making Sandra uncomfortable.

"Sounds good," he said, looking at Lofton.

From his chair on the stairs, Rusty, who must have been listening to everything, said, "Good movie. You'll like it," he smiled.

He turned to Alison. "Lofton lives just behind me, down the street. It's a short walk."

The sun was dropping below the Millrose Tower, and the same golden glow that had enveloped everything last evening was reemerging. Shooting up to the sky, the magnolia was shimmering in the golden rays, noble as always. He smiled at Alison and Lofton, happy with his earlier decision not to go off to the coffee shop. Yes, enough arguing about squirrels, he thought.

Chapter 15

At the appointed time, Alison and he arrived, walking through the gates to The Oaks. The sky was streaked with turquoise, and he thought back to when as a boy that had been among his favorite colors. Every day is a new day, he thought, another opportunity to work to start again. There was no way to know what would come of his encounter with Alison, for it was fragile, and it was complicated, but he had an overriding sense of confidence, or better, of hope, that all would be well. As they walked past the pool to Lofton's door and knocked, he looked at her, and she looked at him, smiled and laughed, and peaked through the blinds to see whether Lofton was on his way to the door. He could tell she felt safe with him, and he felt at ease with her. Everything could so be so easy, he thought.

The door opened, and Lofton waved them in with a smile. "Seven thirty, exactly. Come on in, and make yourself comfortable," he said. They had not brought beer, and Lofton was not drunk. Lofton, who usually seemed deflated, at least at the bar, now looked a way that he'd not seen before, as if reinvigorated. He was pretty sure it was joy in him, he saw.

"I don't have anything to drink," he began to apologize.

"That's okay," Alison said.

"Well, let's put it on." He dimmed the living room's light, the screen came on, and the film began. They watched the opening shot, the hero, the Driver, standing alone in his Los Angeles apartment, looking out to the night skyline. The hero said into the phone,

"There's a hundred thousand streets in the city. If I drive for you, you give me a time and a place, I give you a five minute window. Anything happens in that five minutes, then I'm yours, no matter what. Anything happens a minute either side of that, and you're on your own. Do you understand?"

After what in his opinion had to be one of the greatest heist sequences in film history had concluded, it was time for the opening credits. Knowing the film like the back of his own hand, Lofton snuck in a quick comment, turning his head to them from the other couch, "So awesome," he said, with a massive smile.

A second later, there was a jump cut producing a stunning aerial night shot of the Los Angeles skyline, the roving canonic view accompanied by Kavinsky's anthem *Nightcall* thumping through that mysterious space, in which it's no longer easy to differentiate between the world of the film and the world of those watching it.

"I'm giving you a night call to tell you how I feel"

The opening credits rolled, and then the name of the lead actress flashed in pink cursive across the screen. Alison leaned over, and, cupping her hand over her mouth, whispered with a laugh into his ear, "I don't like Carey Mulligan." Without saying a word, she put her head on his shoulder, and clasped his hand. He felt like they had known one another forever.

As the credits continued, the hero drove his car through the Los Angeles streets, a female voice singing to the song's electronic beat,

*"There's something inside you
It's hard to explain
They're talking about you, boy
But you're still the same"*

With the opening credits nearing their completion, the hero walked past the girl, she exiting their apartment building's elevator on her way to her car in the garage to work, the hero on his way up the elevator back to his apartment. They watched the elevator door close, as she is seen walking away, and then a jump cut took them inside his apartment, the Driver standing alone in his bedroom, the city lights shining in through the window, casting his shadow against the turquoise wall, the image of his double overlaying the cruciform shape of the window pane's shadow. And *that*, he thought, was the entire movie condensed into one beautiful, brilliant ten second sequence. It was a very simple story, of course. Good guy and girl fall in love, good guy is tested by adversity, good guy overcomes the evil, including his own worst inclinations, in the name of love. Ultimately, that love will require an act of sacrifice. The girl might never understand why he has done what he has, but he does it anyway, knowing it is what's truly best, no matter how hard it happens to be for him. He smiled, and thought about how if the others were here watching with them now, they would be mocking it: *cliché*, sentimental, oversimplistic, or whatever. He was glad when she didn't. She squeezed his hand, and the opening credits ended.

Later that night, when the movie was over, and they had left Lofton's, she to head to her house, and he to his, he lied in bed staring at the ceiling. He wondered whether she was at home, the same song from the movie stuck in her head that was now stuck in his.

*"I don't sleep
I do nothing but think of you
I don't eat"*

*I don't sleep
I do nothing but think of you

You keep me under your spell
You keep me under your spell"*

He drifted off to sleep, the idea of tomorrow filling him with expectation. It meant one day closer to Saturday night, when he would see her again.

Chapter 16

Though yesterday, which had been Thursday, felt to belong to another lifetime, for everything following on Wednesday was unfurling in slow motion, the night when he had seen the movie with Alison now itself feeling to have been an eternity ago, the event's resounding joy continued resonating through the immediate surroundings he encountered here, since, unlike the past preceding both yesterday and the day before it, everything now was changed, existence no longer laboring under the weight of the familiar tedium and exhaustion. Being itself now was light, rendered translucent with the love he felt trembling forth through all things. Some of the changes were small, yet no less profound. For example, though nobody he knew was sitting with him outside in the sun at the coffee shop on Friday afternoon, this did not mean he was alone, because he had Alison's number, which meant they were able to be in touch, and he was relieved to see that she was apparently as eager to be texting frequently about anything that came to her mind as he was to text her about what came to his. They shared mundane details about what they were doing throughout the day, and they swapped questions about everything, both serious things and silly alike. He could feel the transformation love was undertaking within him, hollowing out what had been there before, leaving nothing of the I in the wake of the We now forming in its place.

He whittled away the afternoon hours contemplating whether to ask her if she wanted to meet up tonight, but he decided against doing so, since he feared looking overeager. The evening came. He watched the sunset transfigure the clouds. God the painter, he thought. They turned pink and orange, then purple, and then various shades of blue till night fell. On Fridays like this, typically he would be sure to go out with friends somewhere, but when the sun began setting, he had finished his reading, closed out his tab, and went next door to the laundromat. He gathered his clothes from the dryer, watched the sunset, and then said goodbye to Jackson and the others who were showing up. He could tell they wanted to ask why he wasn't staying for beer and dominoes, but nobody questioned him. He could tell they thought he wanted to be alone because he was depressed, but he wasn't. He felt content.

When he walked home, he hoped he might see Timothy in the courtyard, but he wasn't there. He went to his neighbor's door and knocked, but there was no answer. He pressed his ear to the door, and heard nothing. He thought about asking others in the building if they had seen him recently, but nobody knew one another well enough for asking to do any good.

He made spaghetti. After dinner, he smoked cigarettes and read more on the couch. Then, in order to hasten tomorrow, he went to bed early.

Saturday evening arrived. The party was set to begin at nine-thirty, but Jack had told him to come over earlier, if he wished. Some others would be there too. He got there at eight. Jack and David's apartment was on the second floor of a yellow brick house reminiscent of a modest, charming East Coast home from a Hopper landscape. Tony, whom he had not seen since the lake outing, was pulling up to the front of the house, as he came walking up the street from the other direction. Tony waved through the windshield, and he waved back. He opened the car door, popped his head of black hair above the roof, and pointed his thumb to the back. "Hey man, I have some stuff in the trunk Jack asked me to buy. Think you could help me carry it in?"

He walked to the trunk. Tony opened it, and they grabbed a number of cases of beer. "Tecate?" he asked Tony. Tony laughed, "Nasty, I know, but it's what he wanted." There were two kegs to carry in also. As they approached the stairs, Tony observed, "You seem to be in a good mood."

"Yeah, I met a girl," he said.

"Oh, I see. Nice. What's her name?" They started up the stairs before he could answer.

They set the cases down on the floor of the living room as David came walking in with Jack from the kitchen. "Tony," David said ignoring him, "good to see you."

"Thanks for bringing the beer up guys," Jack said looking at them both.

"No problem. There's more downstairs," he said.

Tony, Jack, and he went to the trunk. "These are pretty heavy. Back at the store, it took two guys to carry one," Tony explained. Jack and he lifted one together. "Tell David to come down and help me with this last one," Tony said tapping the remaining keg. When they reached the top of the stairs with theirs, Jack and he were winded and sweating. Jack began coughing.

"I need a cigarette."

David laughed. "No, you don't." Jack lit one anyway.

"Tony said to tell you he wanted you to give him a hand with the other one," he said to David. He could see David thought he was making up the request, as a way to distract him from ridiculing Jack, or maybe to punish him for Tuesday's argument at the bar. Noticing David's

incredulity, Jack chimed in to confirm the errand's authenticity. "If you don't want to do it, like Tony asked, that's fine. I can go down again, David."

"No, no, it's fine." David laughed more lightheartedly. "You can be such a baby sometimes, Jack."

A few minutes later, they had both kegs in the living room. "Okay, awesome. Now we just need to get them out to the yard," Jack observed.

Tony shook his head. "Yeah, you know, why didn't we just take them straight down the driveway to the yard?"

"At first, I thought it might be nice to have them inside, but then I changed my mind. I think it'll be better to have them in the yard. It's going to be nice tonight, so most people will probably want to be outside, anyway," Jack explained.

"Yeah right, Jack. Everyone knows you're a hypochondriac. There's no way to have a party at our place without having people inside. Face it, we invited too many people. But if you want the kegs in the yard, that's fine," David said.

Tony looked to have found a solution. "Why not just have somebody else carry them down later?"

"Yeah, now there's a very good point. Let's have Brian do it," David concluded.

Tony's face turned ashen. "Brian?" he murmured incredulously.

"Yes, Brian," David said, pretending not to understand why Tony would be alarmed. Brian Hipple was a former art student from Boston, who worked now at one of the museums with a gallery installation team. His big auburn beard accentuated the roughneck impression, and his place within the group as its self-styled Teddy Roosevelt, in short, the macho sophisticate. Brian was particularly close with Jack, though he was also on good terms with many of the others, including Clara whom he'd briefly dated years ago before she'd met Paul, so it made fine sense he'd be invited. The trouble, though, was that Tony and Brian had been butting heads recently. About what exactly, neither of them was able to say. Only a few weeks ago, while they were all drunk here at Jack and David's apartment one late night, Brian had threatened to throw Tony out the window or bash his head into the sink. No one, including Tony, could remember what had occasioned the dispute. But in any case, everyone knew Brian had a long memory, was prone to grudges, and, given his size, he was not the type to be trifled with.

"Well, if he's coming, at least I came prepared," Tony smiled. He pulled a switch blade from his pocket, and twirled it.

"Ah, great, now you're carrying a knife, so that when you pull it out, Brian will take it from you, and stab and kill you," David chortled. Judging by the smile on his face, David was

enjoying the fact that he knew he was in fine form tonight. In order to keep the momentum going until everyone would be here, he assumed David would be throwing in the occasional jab at those around him, like a prize boxer punching before he stepped in the ring. Early indications were that David's sarcasm was calibrated perfectly tonight, biting but not too bitter.

"Whatever, I'm ready for anything," Tony said. The witticisms and one-upmanship began in earnest. Rather than listen to the banter, he sat down on the couch in the conjoining room, and thought about Alison.

"Hey, by the way, what about that girl you mentioned?" Tony asked him after the banter subsided.

"Her name's Alison. She'll be coming tonight, so you'll get to meet her," he said. He noticed something stirring within David, his eyes dilating with a sense of possibility.

"It'll be good to meet her," Jack said. "Speaking of which, where is Mick?" he asked.

"He's not coming tonight," David answered cryptically, so to invite further questions. Everyone turned to him in surprise.

"Why not?" Tony asked.

"He said he wants to be alone. Apparently, he'd been counting on a number of posts, he wasn't interviewed for any of them, but he still thought he had a sure thing in Perth, some sort of postdoc, but that fell through unexpectedly on Monday, so now officially he has nothing. I saw him Tuesday on campus, drunk as a skunk. He even pissed on a tree." David shrugged.

"So, what's he going to do then?" Jack asked.

"He's not sure. Probably go back to Australia anyway, and maybe try the job market again next year," David concluded.

Tony looked at David. "Interesting. Well, what about Cody?"

"He's with Paul and Clara. They said they'd be picking up beer when they finish dinner, so they should be here soon."

"Goat?" Tony asked.

David nodded a no. "Jessica."

Talk of Mick's academic woes must have triggered Tony to think of Karl next. "What about Karl? Is he coming tonight?"

"Nobody's heard from him. We tried calling him," David said looking to Jack. Jack threw up his hands. "No idea about Karl."

Without saying anything, everyone knew the absences marked an irreversible turning. For Mick and Karl to skip tonight's birthday party meant they both were tired, and they now were reorienting themselves with an eye to a future that would no longer involve everyone else here in the room. What that future for them would be was impossible to say, but the fact that everyone knew Mick and Karl were choosing the unknown over what had been routine was impossible to ignore. There was no going back. After a long heavy silence that served as an unspoken wake for all of their times together that were now never to be repeated, they accepted the reality of the newly contracted circle, and the discussion turned to one of their favorite subjects, the terrible state of the academic job market. He wasn't interested in listening to everyone offering their theories about the causes for its ills and what should be done to fix them, so he went out to the landing on the back stairs, lit a cigarette, and texted Alison. "Be there soon!" she said. He checked the time: nine o'clock.

Jack, who understandably was becoming dispirited thinking about those who wouldn't be coming, leapt from the couch at the chance to answer the door, when somebody then rung the bell. "I bet that's Cody and Clara," he said beaming, forgetting to mention Paul. Like everyone, Jack must have known that it was Paul who was still most tethered to routine, while Cody and Clara were far less so. Highlighting the fact that they were here, while acting like Paul were the afterthought, was probably Jack's way of coping with the group's dissolution, and the undeniability of everything's fleetingness, above all his own life, this being something of a milestone for him, forty signifying the unambiguous end of his youth. He grabbed three Tecates from the table, and disappeared down the stairs.

"Hello," Clara could be heard saying in an excited voice when the door opened. "Happy birthday to the birthday, boy," she said.

"Hey, guys," he said. "Thanks so much for coming."

Jack walked in carrying a small gift box, Clara and Cody trailing behind him. They shut the door. Assuming he must be outside getting ready to carry something in, Tony turned to Clara, "Where's Paul? I can give him a hand."

Clara's cheeks flashed a rosy red that nearly matched her hair. She instantly composed herself, and said casually, "Oh, Paul's not here. He decided to stay home, and get some work done. He's been working on a big collage."

Aside from the fact that everyone knew Paul had been looking forward to tonight's party, and that he could easily have picked another time to work, there was the fact that only a few hours ago, Paul had texted Jack and David to say he'd be picking up more beer for the party, when he and Clara came over. But now Clara and Cody were empty-handed except for the gift, and Jack had not heard from Paul. He recognized the obvious, that Paul must have gotten too drunk to be able to come over, and Clara, worried that Uncle Paulie would rear its ugly head, had left him behind at their house. Cody, who had not said anything since arriving, appeared to be taking Paul's absence a little too nonchalantly. Judging by the way he was

standing so closely to her, the chance to be here tonight with Clara and Paul gone was evidently something he saw as a stroke of good fortune.

Having come to the same conclusion regarding the true reason for Paul's absence, David for his own part was turning immediately to practical matters. "Well, we're going to be short on beer. Cody, let's go down to the store." David stood up, and walked out the upstairs door leading to the stairs, with Cody following him closely. Tony shouted down the stairwell, "Hey, David, do you need the car?" They heard the voice, its Canadian accent, echoing up to them, "No! We'll walk." The door knob turned and the door shut a few seconds later.

There were footsteps coming up the back stairs, with louds voices and laughing. "Oh, others must be here!" Jack rushed to the window overlooking the yard, stuck his face through the tattered blinds, and then walked through the kitchen to open the door. "Happy birthday!" everyone shouted.

A group of five or six people he had not met before walked into the living room carrying beer. A minute later there were more voices, and then a couple walked in, then a minute after that more noise, and then a trio of graduate students from Cody's philosophy program. The floodgates were opened, and within half an hour the upstairs living room, dining room, and kitchen were entirely full, with a dozen or so more people also gathering out in the yard. He was feeling a little hemmed in upstairs, so he decided to go outside. He walked down the back stairs, and took a seat in the red gazebo underneath the tree.

Jack had strung white lights over the gazebo, as well as down the stairs. Someone was starting a fire in the pit. He thought about pulling up a chair to the fire, but instead he lit a cigarette, and watched the yard steadily fill up. He knew most of the people there, some of whom would wave to him when they came in. But mostly nobody seemed to notice his presence, which he liked.

By about eleven, he was seriously beginning to wonder where she was. He had drunk a few beers to have something to do while waiting, and then made the rounds in the yard, greeting those he knew, and being introduced to their friends or dates. There were too many names to possibly remember. He scanned the yard, and didn't see her, so he decided to walk upstairs and see how Jack and Tony were doing.

He walked through the crowd in the kitchen, barely able to hear anyone's voices over the sound of the music coming from the stereo outside at the top of the stairs. He entered the living room, where he found Tony and Jack standing on the threshold between the dining room and living room, greeting people as they showed up. He walked over. As he was about to say something to them, the front door opened. It was Alison and a young man he'd not seen before. The man was extremely tall, and very handsome, with a slender build, and a chiseled face. He looked momentarily unsure where to go when he entered, because the living space was already too full, but Alison grabbed his arm and pointed in his direction to where Tony and Jack were standing with him.

He waved to her, but she didn't wave back, because she had a bottle of champagne with a ribbon tied around it. "Hi," the man with Alison said, shaking Jack's hand. "You must be Jack," he said. "Yeah, dude. Very good to meet you," Jack said. "I'm Preston," he said. Realizing that Jack didn't recognize them, Tony offered his hand to Alison, "Can I help you take that?"

"Oh, yes, thanks. It's a gift," she said nervously without looking at Jack directly.

"Oh, wow, thank you. Awesome," Jack exclaimed, taking the champagne.

"I'm Alison," she told them.

"Oh, I've heard about you from this guy," Tony said laughing, pointing at him.

He put out his hand out to Preston, "Hi, good to meet you," he said. As they were finishing with introductions, the door swung open, and it was Cody and David again, returning from another beer run at the corner store. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Clara, who had been sitting with some friends on the couch, see them come in to the room, and, anticipating that they would be walking over to Tony and Jack, she had leapt up from the couch, heading here to the group as well, since it would give her the chance to be near to Cody, but also more importantly, to meet Alison.

"More beer! Great guys," she said to David and Cody, as she nuzzled up between Alison and Preston. She looked over at Jack. "Champagne, Jack? Fancy too! Who brought that in here?" she laughed. Jack looked at Clara, and then glanced to Alison. "Clara, Alison and—"

"Preston," the man said. He stuck out his hand to Clara, who shook it flirtatiously.

"Alison, is it?" she said.

"Yes."

"I'm Clara." She paused a moment. "Someone should help Jack with the champagne."

Tony grabbed the bottle from Jack. "Good idea. C'mon, let's go find a corkscrew."

As they walked into the kitchen to search for something to open the champagne, Clara looked directly at him for a second, raising her eyebrows, and pointing with her eyes to Alison and Preston. The implication was that Alison had come with somebody else in order to make him jealous. He realized Clara had her own self-serving reasons for wanting him to conclude that, but in any case, he didn't see it that way. He recognized perhaps he was seeing only what he wanted to see, but when he thought back to his old friend's comments about how girls were always testing a man, he honestly did not see this as any kind of test. If it was, it didn't bother him.

Cody leaned over to the table and grabbed a beer, handed one to Clara, and then turned pleasantly to Alison and Preston. "Guys?"

“Sure,” Preston said flinching, clearly appalled at the prospect of drinking a Tecate.

“Alison?” Cody asked.

“No, thanks. I’ll wait on the champagne.”

The decision, which effected the social equivalent of a train derailment, upset everything. Preston now felt like he’d taken a Tecate for no reason, and Cody’s bad attempt at being friendly was quickly unmasked for what it was, a transparent ploy to tweak him by acting like Preston and Alison were a couple. He could tell that Alison already didn’t like Cody. Cody, who was flushed with embarrassment having realized she was not stupid like his condescension had implied, and knowing he’d been caught in front of everyone trying to taunt him by manipulating her, fell silent. Miraculously, David was silent too, unsure of what to say. Whatever his best laid plans for the night may have been, David was discombobulated by the fact that Alison had come with another man, and there was no easy way of reorganizing with another strategy after Cody had just blundered so clumsily right in front of everyone.

“I’ll be back. Anyone want to go for a smoke?” Cody fumbled. David overcame the temptation to leave the embarrassing situation, the curiosity getting the better of him. “I’ll smoke later,” he said. No one else said anything.

Tony and Jack joined the group with glasses just as Cody stepped aside, handing one to everyone in the group except for Preston, who was still holding his Tecate. Clara had chugged her Tecate already, and with her freshly freed hand, she grabbed a champagne glass. Preston stared at his beer with dread, and couldn’t find it within himself to finish it. “Excuse me,” he said, as he turned around and walked to the line for the bathroom.

Alison walked from where she had been standing since coming inside, and stood next to him. “I did it,” she smiled.

“What?” he asked.

“Justice. I broke up with Justice.” Then her face momentarily looked distant, and a sadness crept over it. She felt badly about hurting him.

He was ecstatic, but didn’t want to gloat, especially since he understood Justice must be upset, so he asked gently, “How did he take it?”

“It was really bad. I feel terrible, but I knew I had to do it. I can tell you later.”

She slipped her hand into his, and they stood comfortably, a couple for anyone to see. Tony finished pouring the glasses, at which point he cleared his throat, tapped his glass, and waited till the whole upstairs fell quiet. Everyone looked on at him.

“I’ll be brief,” he began. “Thank you all for coming,” he said, assuming a demeanor that made everyone in the room feel like they were back in the Old Country, their commanding but

reassuring Cuban father issuing a decisive word that would capture the mood everyone was feeling on the special occasion. “As you many of you know,” he explained, “I’m Tony. Jack and I have been friends for many years now. We were even roommates for a time, before he left me for David.” The room laughed. “He made the right choice,” David interjected. The room laughed again. “Anyway,” Tony continued, “tomorrow Jack is forty. Or, I guess,” he looked at a clock, “he’s forty in ten minutes.” Everyone burst out hollering and cheering and whistling. “Jack, happy birthday. And thank you to everyone for coming tonight. Enjoy your night, and let’s have a toast to Jack!” Tony raised his champagne glass to the ceiling. Jack sipped down his champagne, dabbed his chin, and shot a big grin to Tony—everyone cheered again.

“Hello. Welcome to our place,” David said, outstretching his hand to Alison. After the disaster with Cody, he was trying to disassociate himself from anything he knew she might suspect was his doing. He could tell David was intrigued by her intelligence. “Glad to see you dressed comfortably,” he said, pointing to her ballet flats. She was in black jeans and a dark blue shirt. More strikingly, though, was the fact that she was wearing very little make-up, which was unique among the others at the party who had done themselves up more than usual. He knew David would find that intriguing as well. He could see David going through his internal check-list of admirable things he would like in a girl, or at least respect about someone’s taste in one, and finding himself unable to find anything to dislike. “You remind me of my ex-girlfriend,” he said ironically looking at her, and everyone laughed. It wouldn’t take long before his admiration for her personality turned into resentment that he didn’t have somebody in his life like her.

Preston walked back into the room, and winced a little when he saw Alison holding his hand. He looked like he was about to turn to the door, when Clara called him over to the group. “Preston!” She had a way of using somebody’s name she had just met to flatter him, which in this case was effective, since he was understandably feeling adrift, alone at the party, with what he thought was his date now holding another man’s hand.

“Clara, is it?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Do we know each other?”

“I don’t think so. We probably have mutual friends, though,” she suggested. He could tell Preston wanted to say that was unlikely, but because he was in no position to insult anyone, seeing as he was flustered, he nodded instead. Cody walked back into the room from having his cigarette, and, seeing Clara engaged with Preston, immediately walked up to join the group. David, he noticed out of the corner of his eye, was enjoying everything immensely.

“Preston, Cody is a philosophy student,” David said. He could tell David thought he was setting up a cock fight.

“I see,” Preston said.

Noticing that Preston looked unimpressed, Cody asked, "What do you?"

Preston laughed nonchalantly, as if he were about to throw his arms over the back of a recliner, and said, "Oh, nothing really. I'm an artist, or, well, I suppose more of a writer."

By this time souring on everything in her life, especially Paul back at home, Clara had lost patience with the night, and appeared ready to dispense pretending that she was seriously interested in Preston. That everyone was beginning to feel the effects of the champagne was a contributing factor too, he thought.

"A writer?" she said dismissively. "What do you write?"

"Oh, things," he said vaguely, with an air of indifference.

"Well, tell us. It shouldn't be hard to explain," she asserted. David giggled. Jack lit a cigarette. Tony took a seat at the nearby table. Cody put his hand to his chin, and stuck his lower lip out. Sensing that there was no way out, and that everyone wanted to hear an answer, Preston stammered, "Well, er, beauty. I'm writing about beauty. More specifically, about how our consumeristic age has commodified beauty in such a way that now what is actually ugly has come to be considered beautiful, and vice versa." It was amateur drivel, clearly, and David suppressed a laugh.

Looking at the others, David cracked, "I didn't know somebody invited Adorno."

He would not deny that David's joke was funny. But in a way, it made him sad. Sad for everyone. Sad for Preston, who was clearly uncomfortable. For David, who enjoyed the satisfaction of putting Preston down. Then he felt badly about himself, when he realized how, on many occasions, he'd made similar jokes about others. He also had been on the receiving end of many, too. He thought about how everyone here would gossip about anyone when he wasn't there, and he knew of course that he had been the subject of sustained ridicule and mockery and critical analysis when he wasn't there to hear it. And, of course, everyone knew the same was true of him. Everyone knew this, and the result was a cynical sort of tacit agreement where every consented to be vicious to one another, since at any time somebody might object, it would be easy for the one presently being accused of cruelty to point out the hypocrisy of his accuser, since invariably the latter at some point had said or done exactly what he was now accusing another of saying or doing. Over the years, things had spiraled out of control, and it was difficult to imagine how the course could be reversed.

Sensing that everyone was now making fun of Preston, Alison spoke up. "Preston isn't just a writer. He's also an artist. A very talented painter," she added.

Alison looked directly at Clara, who looked away.

"Sorry, what do you do, Alison?" Tony asked. "I should have asked earlier."

"I'm an art student," she said, too humble to say she was an artist. She said a few things about her charcoal drawings. Tony and Jack were impressed, Tony even at one point shooting him a "well done" look when she was talking. No longer being able to take it, David waited for her to pause, then said, "I'm going to check on the fire downstairs," and walked out.

"He'll need my help," Cody said, following behind.

Clara looked at Alison and him. "It's crowded. Why don't we go downstairs also?"

They walked through the kitchen. When they went through the door to the landing on the stairs, Alison squeezed his hand, and told him to stop. They stood where they were, taking in the sight of the white lights, and the fire, and the crowd of people smoking and drinking and talking. The moon was full. "Look at that," she said, looking up but without saying more. Without saying a word to her, or she to him, they knew to make their way to the red gazebo.

They passed through others, and took a seat another couple had just stood up from to leave. When they sat down, they kissed. She started laughing. They kissed again. Then they sat in silence for a few minutes, sipping their champagne, and watching the yard. She suddenly stood up. "I'll be right back."

She made her way across the yard through the crowd. A Modest Mouse song called *Never Ending Math Equation* had just begun playing.

*"I'm the same as I was when I was 6 years old
And oh my God I feel so damn old
I don't really feel anything
On a plane, I can see the tiny lights below"*

He looked up to the stereo to see it was Jack, who had put on the song. He was going to smile at Jack, but Jack by then was feeling the effects of the champagne and Tecate, and was too drunk to notice.

*"Is yourself?
The universe works on a math equation
that never even ever really ends in the end
Infinity spirals out creation"*

Looking at Jack, and everyone else there, he understood that even if the universe did work on a math equation, it had nothing to do with existence, since existence was human, one full of hopes, and dreams, and desires, and thoughts, and regrets, and so many other things, none of which had absolutely anything to do with what a math equation could ever say about it at all. Even Jack, who in the heat of a philosophical debate was prone to be the one to argue that the universe was inherently mathematical, did not truly believe it, he could now see plainly. Here Jack was drunk on his fortieth birthday, and the last thing on his mind was a math equation. He saw Jack had put the song on, probably because he liked that line, but it was a line that was

impossible for him to live by, something that had no real bearing on where Jack, and everyone else there, found themselves.

*“You ain't machines and you ain't land
And the plants and the animals, they are linked
And the plants and the animals eat each other...”*

He watched Alison weave through the crowd, where she found Preston waiting. He was standing on the driveway on the far side of the fire pit. He was alone, and he looked resigned. She walked up to him, they said a few words to one another, and he leaned down to hug her. They embraced for a few seconds, and then he turned around and was gone, vanishing into the night.

He glanced over at Jack again, who was now standing in the yard with Tony, David, Cody, and Clara. Clara, he saw, had watched Alison and Preston hug, and the latter leave. He could see Clara scanning the crowd, looking to see where he was. Her eyes finally reached the gazebo, where she saw that he had been watching her watch Alison, and then look to find him. She glanced away embarrassedly.

He could tell that Alison was worried he would be jealous, so she had thrown on a big smile as she was walking back, locking eyes with him the entire way back to the gazebo. She sat back down next to him, put her hand on his knee, and rested her head on his shoulder.

Hours later, when the party finally was over and all the guests but them had left, they sat alone in the gazebo and talked. He hadn't been planning on it, but they had sex. When they were finished, and they were about to leave, she said, “Oh, no, my purse! I left it upstairs.” They looked up at the second story. The lights were off.

“C'mon, let's go,” he said, leading her up the stairs. They got to the door, and turned the knob. It was locked.

“Let's try the front door,” she suggested.

“Won't work. It'll be locked. Jack and David live upstairs anyway, and their downstairs neighbor is home. He went to bed a long time ago, so we can't knock.”

She was staring at the windows, looking to see whether there was a way to climb inside. He knocked on the door a few more times. Still no answer. Then he had an idea. He walked to the railing on the other side of the landing, leaned over, and gently tapped the window.

“What's that?” she asked.

“David's room,” he whispered.

“Isn't he asleep?”

“Maybe. The light went off a few minutes ago. But he might still be awake.”

She looked at him knowingly, obviously assuming it was a longshot that he would let them in. She had seen David and he had a contentious relationship, so she was not expecting anything.

Just as they were about to lose hope, the door opened.

“Come on in you, idiots,” David said in his night robe. It was dark, but he could almost see David crack a smile.

Chapter 17

They slept late, tired from last night. They didn’t know what else to do, but because they didn’t want to stay cooped inside the apartment on such a sunny afternoon, they decided they would stop by the bar. They thought Lofton might be there.

When they got there, it was more crowded than they had expected it to be. They grabbed the last pair of stools next to one another at the counter, the same spot, they both realized, as the one on the first night they met. Billy came over. “What’ll it be?”

“Two Lone Stars, please,” he said.

An older man who was sitting alone stirred. “Always a fine choice,” he said. The man looked to be in his early fifties, his matted gray hair reaching down to his glasses. He was wearing a leather jacket, which he removed and placed on the counter next to his whiskey glass.

“Come here often?” the man asked him.

He hesitated, embarrassed to say that he did. The man laughed. “I understand,” he said.

“I’m Alison.” He said his name too.

“Very nice to meet you both. I’m—” there was a loud noise outside from a car that made what he said inaudible. He thought about asking the man what his name was, because he figured there was no point, since by the looks of it, the man was not planning to leave any time soon, there would be time to ask later.

“You two from around here?”

“She is,” he said pointing to Alison.

“Is that so?” he said.

“Yeah. I like it. But we might be moving. Or, well, he might be,” she said looking at him.

“Moving?” he asked.

“Yeah. We’ll see.”

“To where?”

“Oxford.”

“Oxford! Wow, very impressive. What for?”

“Philosophy,” he answered.

“Philosophy! Wow, very, very impressive.” He looked at Alison with a good-natured smile and said, “You might want to hang on to this one.”

She laughed and said, “I know.”

He gestured outside, “Well, as for me, I’m just passing through.”

Alison was curious. “You’re not from here?”

“Oh, no, I’m not from here.” He smiled. “I’m a pilot.”

“A pilot? Very cool,” he said.

“Yeah, well, I’m just in town for a safety re-certification program. They bring us in, so I’ll be here for the next few days, before I head home to Florida.” The man didn’t say more about the program. He thought about asking whether the program was strictly all writing, or whether there was any actual flying involved. He didn’t want to say so, but there was an irony here in a pilot drinking when he was going to be flying. He decided not to ask. Sometimes it was better not to question somebody, when doing so would lead them to lie, he decided.

He looked on them with a huge approving smile. Rather than embitter him, the sight of their youth seemed to uplift him. “Boy, I’ll tell you what, you two are in love,” he chuckled. He paused. Then he looked straight at them, and without a trace of hesitation said, “You two should get married.” There was nothing frivolous about the statement. He clearly said it with seriousness, and as someone who had seen many couples over the years, maybe someone who had been married himself once.

“Maybe one day,” he said.

“Maybe one day?” the man chuckled. “Look at this young lady. She’s beautiful, and she’s in love with you. Tell him, sweetie, you are in love with him, aren’t you?” Everyone sat in silence, with Alison blushing. “Well, see, there you go. You two don’t say anything to each other, but it’s pretty darn obvious to me,” he laughed.

“You don’t know what you’ll have tomorrow he said,” taking a sip of his whiskey. “If you love each other, you should say it, and you should get married.”

Later that evening, when they were walking home, he realized he had not asked for the man's name. He decided he would simply have to remember him as The Pilot.

They walked into the apartment.

He sat on the couch, and she stood in the bedroom doorway. He stood up. They stared at each other.

"So, are you going to marry me or what?"

She laughed, thinking he was joking. He was silent.

"Are you serious?" He was silent still.

"You dummy, you don't even have a ring! That's not how you ask someone to marry you," she laughed. He could tell that she had just said yes.

"Yes, I'll marry you."

Chapter 18

If the days immediately following their movie date at Lofton's had left time dilated, the elongation between when he had seen her last and when he would see her again languishing on like an eternity, now that they were engaged, and saw each other every day, things felt like one continuous day, an endless singular moment for which there was not one thing to be desired to change. It had been three months, and here in the first weeks of fall, her family was to leave for a short trip to the Northwest. She would leave Thursday, and return Monday, only to be gone for a long weekend.

He had seen very little of everyone since Jack's birthday party. However, on Friday night, he was on his couch reading, when Tony rather unexpectedly called to invite him to a party near Paul and Clara's. He agreed to go, and Tony said he'd be by his place at ten to give him a ride there. A few minutes before Tony's arrival, he went out to the courtyard for a cigarette. The three women who'd been drinking their iced teas at the beginning of summer were at the same table, once again drinking their iced teas.

"Hi, guys," he said. He lit a cigarette.

"Want some tea?" one of them asked. She was an older woman in her fifties, with gray hair, and big gentle blue eyes. Evidently her son, who she said he reminded her of, lived out of state, but was coming tomorrow for a visit. She told him more about her family, and then the group exchanged more stories. As he was about to sit down and have a glass of tea, he heard Tony's car pull up. Tony rolled the window down, "Ready when you are."

"Have you seen Timothy?" he asked them.

“Is that the young man we see you with sometimes, who also lives in the building?” a second woman asked.

“Yeah, the one with blond hair,” he added.

“Oh, yes, I know who he is,” she said. “I haven’t seen him in a long time.” Turning to the other two, she said, “Have you?”

The woman whose son was coming to visit tomorrow said, “No, haven’t seen him.” She looked like she wanted to say something else, but then she paused. “We’ll be praying for him,” she said.

He stood up, and gestured to Tony. “I have to be going.” The three women nodded and smiled. “Have a good night, sweetie, emphasis on good,” the third one who had not yet said anything said thoughtfully. He was about to say that he would, but he fell silent. “Thanks.”

The party was only a few minutes from the apartment hosted by a couple that worked as baristas at the coffee shop. A number of people he recognized from the shop where there, as well as a number of others that had been at Jack’s party. Blasting electronic music and flashing disco lights were inside. Everyone had glowsticks in their hands, and wrapped around their necks. A girl came outside and put one around his neck. He wanted to take it off, but he kept it on, just not to be rude. “Oh, awesome, I love rave parties,” Tony said. “Makes me miss Miami,” he added. Sensing he wasn’t in the mood to be inside, Tony offered to grab him a beer. “I’ll be right back,” he said. A few minutes later, he came onto the front porch with Cody following behind him.

“Look who I found,” Tony said smiling.

“Hi, Cody,” he said.

“Hey.”

There were a few seats on the porch, but they decided to stand. They watched the cars drive by for a while in silence.

Tony looked at Cody.

“So, any news, man?”

Cody shook his head. “No, not yet. Decision notifications should be coming out any day, though.” They were talking about philosophy graduate school admissions. “Garson says things are extremely competitive, but he’s confident I’ll have a few good options. Rutgers, MIT, Wisconsin, Pittsburgh—I think Pittsburgh would be great.” The fact he mentioned only some of the top philosophy of science programs in the country suggested that he was feeling good about his chances.

“Great, man. Keep me posted,” Tony said.

Cody stared into the street. "You guys hear about Paul and Clara?"

"No," said Tony.

"They broke up yesterday. Clara told me," Cody said smiling.

"Yeah, well, I suppose we all saw that one coming for a while," Tony remarked.

There was a silence, and then they began talking about the relationship between the philosophy of science and metaethics. From what he knew about Cody's interests, he anticipated it wouldn't be long before Cody took the conversation as an opportunity to lay out his views about what sort of error theory is necessary to account for our everyday ethical discourse. "You know, when I first got into this issue in my first year in the program," Cody said, "I was only interested in problems within the philosophy of science. But as I learn more, and read more, I really think there's a need to reform metaethics in light of what's really going on in the philosophy of science. There are non-realists about value who have different naturalistic arguments, but they are ignorant of the actual science, and the developments in the philosophy of science, which I think is a huge problem." Without intending to do so, he sighed. Cody shot him a glare.

"I'll be back. Excuse me," he told Tony and Cody.

He walked into the house and made his way to the kitchen where he knew there would be beer. It was dark and crowded. Everyone was in other rooms dancing, so the kitchen was empty. He made out the silhouette of a Lone Star pack on the counter, grabbed four of them, sighed again, and thought how he was glad that he no longer felt enthusiasm for being at places like these. He told himself that if Cody had not yet stopped talking about atoms and the void when he got back to the porch, he would not lose his patience.

He walked onto the porch. Cody and Tony were in the same spot, Cody waving his cigarette wildly in order to emphasize whatever point was at issue while Tony was laughing.

"No, no. That's the entire mistake! When you realize that our everyday ontologies carve reality up in a way that is completely detached from the world, then you realize that all of our everyday statements, not just our everyday moral statements, stand no chance of being true, because they don't refer to any states of affairs in the world." Tony and Cody grabbed the beers he offered them, and they continued.

"Okay, that's basically what Russell said. Or the point Wittgenstein later made against his earlier self," Tony remarked.

He decided to interject. He looked at Cody. "If everything's an illusion, then isn't your theory too?"

Cody smirked. "I'm not sure what you mean."

“Well, excuse me if I’m wrong since I missed some of what you’re saying while inside, but from what I gather, you think the everyday world, what someone like Flanagan or others call the ‘manifest image’ of reality, is in fact an illusion, whereas the ‘scientific image,’ whatever that precisely consists in, is true reality. Right?”

“Well, I don’t know if I agree with everything about Flanagan’s characterization of the manifest image. I’m more interested in Nelson Goodman.”

“The point is that things we take for granted, such as free will, value, and morality, those things, you believe are illusory. But then so is your scientific theory about them.”

“Well, it depends on what you mean by free will. I certainly reject libertarian free will. But there are compatibilist versions worth considering.”

“Setting compatibilism aside, you yourself are a hard determinist.”

“Well, of course, agent causation or whatever is conceptually incoherent, and even if it weren’t, there’s no empirical evidence for its existence, anyway.”

“I don’t know if it’s incoherent. Kant didn’t think it was. And in any case, I don’t think there’s much scientific evidence in support of the idea free will is false. People always say there is, but that’s actually just a perfect example of what someone like Heidegger would call ‘idle talk.’”

The reference to Heidegger, whom Cody had never read, ruffled his feathers.

“You don’t know the literature. The studies are conclusive, or at least overwhelming,” he countered.

“How do you know?” he asked. Cody assumed he meant how many studies have you read, how many such studies are in existence, how persuasive are their results, and so forth. But he meant something else.

“The only way anyone could know anything of that sort, especially on a broadly empiricist view, which is ultimately the one you’re committed to, is through the senses. You have to perceive these things. The scientist uses his vision to walk into the lab, uses his touch to manipulate his instruments, his hearing to listen to others, and so on. It would not be possible to even conduct an experiment meant to call into question the validity of the manifest image without depending on it. It’s where we are, and even the scientist who thinks it’s an illusion, lives in it.”

“Okay, so you’re making a classic self-refutation argument. You’re saying that if the naturalistic theory were true, it would have to be false, since it would undermine itself. There are responses to those sorts of arguments in the literature. Philosophers of science and naturalists have ways of responding to those arguments.”

"In ethics?"

"Of course. That's what Tony and I are talking about."

"So, you think there aren't moral truths?"

Tony interrupted, "Yes, I think that. I'm not sure exactly what Cody thinks."

"Well, I agree with Tony. Moral propositions are useful fictions that have pragmatic value, but that's it."

"You're so detached from reality. You think you're getting closer to it with your theories, but the deeper you get into your theories, the less you understand anything at all, especially what's closest to you."

"People just don't like to accept the truth that the universe isn't structured the way that we experience it. Humans are anthropomorphic." Thinking back to the clouds on the drive out to the lake, he thought about how that word always does so much work for those who use it.

He looked at the other people on the porch who were oblivious to the three of them, people immersed in their own lives as much as they were their own, people with no idea about what they were discussing. He looked onto the street, saw the cars, and lit another cigarette.

"So would it be an illusion, then, if one of these girls killed her friends, and we all decided that had been wrong?"

"Well, society needs order. If she did that, she should be arrested and punished," Tony said.

"Yeah, don't be stupid. You're caricaturing the view. There's nothing about moral nihilism that entails retributive attitudes have no place in society. Though one day, perhaps our legal and others societal systems will be reformed in light of what the science teaches us."

"You mean, when it tells us that nobody is free, so nobody's responsible for anything," he said.

"That's an oversimplification."

"Is it? You're the one who just said that if that girl over there shoots that other girl over there here at this party, anyone who thinks that was wrong is being taken in by an illusion."

"That doesn't mean people won't react by treating it as wrong."

"But I'm not making a point about how people will or won't react. I'm making a point about how they ought to react. Or not just that. I'm saying they ought to react by judging it's wrong, because it is wrong."

"What makes it wrong?"

“You tell me why it isn’t wrong. I don’t need a finished theory to know it’s wrong for that girl there to shoot that girl there here on this porch right now. I can see that it is. But you’re the one saying otherwise, so you’re the one who needs the theory. You were saying a few minutes ago to Tony that you were going to be working on that question, so what’s theory? I told you why I think that any such theory, which claims everyday reality is an illusion, is itself the illusion. It’s clear to me if she shot her,” he said gesturing to some people sitting on the porch, “that is wrong.”

There was a silence. He continued, “What is the old Nietzsche quotation from *Beyond Good and Evil* about interpretation...”

Tony interjected, “There are no moral phenomena at all, but only a moral interpretation of phenomena.”

“Yes, that’s the one. But in the same text, Nietzsche also says, ‘Physics is only an interpretation and exegesis of the world (to suit us) and *not* a world-explanation.’ So on Nietzsche’s view, you two are selectively picking and choosing which interpretations of the world you want to believe are more than illusion. That was my original point. I don’t see how Cody can consistently deny the reality of morality in the way he does, while simultaneously appealing to science, as if it tells us how the world really is.”

“So, you’re using a G.E. Moore style argument here,” Tony suggested.

“I don’t know, maybe. That’s not the point. Attribute it to whomever you want.”

“People would judge that it’s wrong, but ultimately it isn’t,” Cody said, his eyes flashing with venom.

“Okay, what if one of the girls came over right now as we’re standing here and shot Tony?” They saw where the line of questioning was going, but both had decided to accept the conclusions, no matter how preposterous.

“Same thing,” Cody said. Tony nodded. “I can’t be biased, just because it’s me.”

“Okay, what if she came over here and killed both of you?”

“No difference. Still not wrong.”

“Okay, what if she came over here and killed all three of us?”

“It’s not wrong. How many times do we have to tell you?”

“So, killing us all so that we couldn’t be having this conversation right now, isn’t wrong?” They looked at him silently. “Then how does this conversation even matter, if it matters so little that the girl over there could come over and kill us, and that wouldn’t make it wrong?”

“You’re making an appeal to emotions,” Tony said. “All that matters is what’s rational.”

“You think it’s rational to believe it’s okay for someone over there to kill anyone at this party? How is *that* rational?”

“Because what we now know about the universe shows that there just aren’t moral facts or truths. People don’t want to believe that, and maybe society needs to believe there are such truths for certain purposes of utility, but the arguments show otherwise.”

“Okay, then go over to those people right now and tell them what we’ve been talking about. Tell them that their lives don’t matter, because if Tony pulled out a gun right now and shot them all dead, that wouldn’t really matter, because everything’s truly atoms and the void, Tony wasn’t free anyway because determinism’s true, and if anyone thinks otherwise, they’re the victim of an illusion due to anthropomorphism. Go ahead, and do it.”

“Just because I’m not going to do that doesn’t mean anything. It doesn’t change the truth,” Tony said.

“You’re right, Tony. It doesn’t mean anything. That’s your view about everything, anyway.”

“That’s an equivocation on the term ‘mean anything’ and you know it. When I say that it wouldn’t mean anything for me to tell those girls that it’s not wrong to shoot them, that doesn’t mean that I’m committed to holding that nothing matters.”

He shook his head and started to laugh at the ridiculousness of the words coming out of Tony’s mouth. Even Tony was smiling. He could see that Tony was seeing his point, even if he would not say so.

He continued. “I mean, if this is what you guys really believe, then why do anything at all? After all, that question doesn’t make sense on your view, since if you’re right, there’s nothing you can do anyway about it, since everything simply happens as it does, including whatever you do or don’t do. Shoot those girls, and it does not matter, do not shoot the girls, and it does not matter; the girls shoot us, and it does not matter, the girls don’t shoot us, and it does not matter. Nothing matters.”

In a way he had not felt before, Tony was seeing that the theory he was endorsing had the bizarre feature of making absolutely no practical difference whatsoever to how he actually experienced the world or what he did in it. It was something he would think about periodically, for example in a philosophy class when he was teaching it to students, or like here, when he was arguing with friends. But it was simply a notion to him, some words on a page or on the blackboard, the equivalent to a little toy on a shelf that he would occasionally take into his hand and inspect for his own amusement before putting it away again.

When he looked at Cody, he saw something very different. And he could see that Tony saw it too. A twisted smile came across Cody’s face, revealing his pride in the fact that they both could see how he relished the belief that everything was meaningless.

The disguise was off, and Cody knew they saw it. Cody was training himself in the cult of nothing, in ways that could get the imagination to run wild, in living in a way that had internalized what it meant supposedly to exist in a universe where nobody was free, nobody was responsible, and nobody mattered. A powerful wind began blowing, hissing through the trees and power lines. It was a coincidence, but the fact it did not feel so, was enough to unsettle Tony completely. Out on the dark porch tonight, he could see that the conversation had shown Tony something Tony had not wanted to see in Cody. But Cody was glad that Tony now did. He thought of the time last year when everyone was at the bar and Clara had pointed to him and Cody: "Ya'll got some weird White Spy and Black Spy thing going on between you two." Standing here on the porch, he knew Tony recalled it too. At the time, he knew Tony hadn't understood what she said. Now he was beginning to understand. "I'm getting tired, and this party sucks. I'm thinking I'm going home," Tony said. He turned from Cody and looked at him. "You need a ride?"

They walked off the porch, and got in the car. As they drove away, they saw Cody had already disappeared into the blacklight party.

Chapter 19

On Tuesday, the sun was out. There was a knock on his door, and he opened it to find Alison standing there in a sundress and sunglasses. She threw her arms around him. "I missed you," she said. "I missed you too," he said, though he was embarrassed to admit it, since he wanted to look tougher than he was. They had plans to meet the twins at the bar for an afternoon drink. The engagement had come as a surprise to everyone they knew, and now everyone was trying to meet the couple.

"Mind if I leave my things here on the couch?"

"Not at all," he said. They laughed together when they both realized that of course she could, since they were engaged now.

They stepped into the sun, and took the usual path he always took there, the one that led to the park with its fountain and magnolia.

"How was the trip?"

"To be honest, I'm so glad it's over. I can't stand trips with my family. By the end of it, I'm exhausted."

He was about to ask why, when suddenly they stopped. There was a crowd of people standing outside the bar, with police pushing them off the steps, and rolling out caution tape. An ambulance was parked out front and paramedics were inside. They saw people crying.

“Everyone, step back, please. Please, everyone, show some respect,” a police officer said.

A young man standing next to them asked his friends, “What’s going on?”

“I heard somebody got shot,” one of them said.

“What?”

“Yeah, just a few minutes ago.”

“What happened?”

“Greg and Melanie were inside. They’re talking to the cops now at the station. They said some guys came in, trying to rob the safe in the back, and somebody there tried to stop them. He got shot. Some crazy Bonnie and Clyde type stuff.”

“Who got shot?”

Just then, they saw Lofton, who was standing nearby, turn to everyone. “It was a guy who works the door,” he said softly. Lofton looked at Alison and him, and then looked away.

They pushed their way to the front, where they saw Billy in tears.

“What happened?”

“Rusty’s dead.”

For perhaps the first time, he was willing to see the place before him for what it is, for what it had always been, starting with the structure itself. Truth be told, it was little more than a dilapidated residential home that no family understandably wanted, its chipping beige paint, rusting sheet metal roof, and rickety stairs, all making for an advanced decrepitude that stringing some tacky white lights stood no hope of mending. This physical dilapidation suited it, above all, because the bar, when considered not merely as a building, but as a place possessed of a character, was frankly worse than dilapidated, but rather outright depraved. The only thing more tattered than the floor’s stained and frayed carpets were the sullied and battered hearts of those who, unable to leave as if under its spell, clung to the illusion that kept them there, to the collective delusion that if everyone continued straining to stay in the thinnest of bare moments, the despondence pervading the place, as well as those within it, would be dispelled. He looked at the place, which he saw was a house of horrors, mortified that it had ever exercised the hold over it him that he had, and for so long. He looked sorrowfully over at Alison, who was staring numbly, the same painful lucidity seeping into her as well.

Without having to say a word, they left. When they got back to the apartment, the twins were calling and texting Alison, but she didn’t answer. She crawled into bed. He stood in the

room and looked at her. He stared at her for a very long time trying to decide what he should say. Eventually, he felt like telling her not to worry, that Rusty was with Christ now. But he knew she wouldn't believe him, and in any case, she herself didn't know if she believed in heaven anyway. She looked up from the pillow, her eyes swollen shut with tears, and said, "Why would anybody do that?" She sobbed, "It's not fair."

He thought about telling her there wasn't anything more to say other than that what happened was wrong. But he knew she already knew.

Chapter 20

A week later, the shock was subsiding, and life was returning to normal. The robbers had been apprehended at a gas station in Louisiana, evidently on their way to New Orleans. They would be returned to Texas, tried, and it occurred to him how one day they probably would be executed in Huntsville. He imagined how one day someone might visit the museum and read an account of the murderers and of Rusty, and still not have the slightest clue about what really happened, or what it really meant. He tried to think what he would say if somebody asked him to explain what he meant, to articulate exactly what he had in mind when he felt that the museum would never be able to say what happened, but he gave up trying to find the words, when he realized he couldn't.

Having returned home to California for a visit, he had wanted to introduce his parents to Alison, but that would have to come later. She was on another short trip with her own family, this time to Tucson, so it would be a few weeks before the two families met.

He was standing across the street from the house, looking at the oak trees on the hillsides, when his mother called to him. "There's a letter for you, sweetie," she said, standing by the mail box. He strode over, and grabbed it. "Thanks," he said. She looked nervous. It was an envelope, with a royal airmail sticker, and an Oxford return address. For important mail, he would use their address, so that in case he moved, he knew it would find him. "I'll go inside," she said.

He took a deep breath, opened the letter, and looked for the essential,

"I am delighted to inform you that your application for admission to the University of Oxford as a graduate student has been successful. We would like to offer you a place for the DPhil in Philosophy beginning ..."

The first thing to do would be to call Alison with the news.

He thought about how if he were writing a story, or even just keeping a diary, it would be possible to encapsulate everything in a few deceptively simple statements. It would be possible to condense a complicated series of everyday events, or better, the momentary

intersection of many lives that had been their common existence, into a few sentences. Of course, there was something about the truth that would never be fully understood by anyone who had not experienced it directly. And even for those who had, still not everything would be entirely comprehensible. But a summary was capable of imparting a degree of what happened, and maybe even what it meant.

He thought about what he might say if he tried. He started with what he thought was most obvious. He would go to Oxford, and be Alison's husband. Mick, humbled for now, would one day succumb again to hubris, circumstances permitting. Having left home for Alberta, David would finish his thesis on Buber, and then claw his way into an academic post he would resent. Jack, who had no plans to leave the city, would hang on to his beer and cigarettes for as long as he could, until finally his health gave out. Karl would disappear, probably to Austin. Tony would return to Miami to build a family of his own, his beliefs about atoms and the void forever remaining relegated to the classroom only. Cody, who had not received an acceptance to a doctoral program, would try reinventing himself as something else, his hope of becoming a great philosopher left by the wayside. Paul, who would never stop missing Clara, would cozy up to Jack, the two united in their shared commitment to staying when everyone else was leaving. Clara would soon leave as well, to where exactly, even she didn't know. Carrell would move into his mansion, seeking disciples, squashing anyone who had other intentions. Justice, who had the money, would leave for Europe, and maybe even walk among the birds on the Seine. Timothy might well end up in an institution, if not under a bridge.

It wasn't the blind necessity of fate. Nor was it chaos. People scoff, he knew, but it was Providence, the result of each person's decision to cooperate with, or else resist, the hand of God in his individual life. This wasn't the best of all possible worlds. But it was a world that stood redeemed, and that was good enough. He stopped thinking and paused. It lasted only a moment. And yet what the flicker of intuition revealed could not be denied. No matter what others said otherwise, he saw. Things were more than an exodus to nowhere.